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Josue

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JOSUE

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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2021

Dedication

I dedicate this effort to Gaby Almaraz and all the mothers, fathers, family members and friends who have suffered because they lost a loved one, especially a teen, to suicide.

And to those souls who were in unbearable pain and decided to end their suffering by suicide.

JOSUE

By

ERALDO ENRICO GIORGIO CHIECCHI, BA

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

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of the Requirements

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To the National Association of Hispanic Journalists where I found a home – *a familia* – and a place to express myself and hone my craft.

To the readers of my work through the years. I thank you for giving me the time to enter into your lives with my efforts to share the news with you.

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And to the late Professor Jim Patten, the greatest journalism professor anyone could ever hope to have who inspires me to this day. In addition to teaching me how to be a good journalist, he taught me the value of diversity long before anyone else knew the term.

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Preface

FOUNDATION OF THE PROJECT

Gay Talese writes in *Writing Creative Nonfiction* (p. 3):

The new journalism, though often reading like fiction, is not fiction. It is, or should be, as reliable as the most reliable reportage, although it seeks a larger truth than is possible through the mere accumulation of verifiable facts, the use of direct quotations, and adherence to the rigid organizational style of the older form.

The new journalism allows - demands in fact - a more imaginative approach to reporting, and it permits the writer **to inject himself into the narrative**, if he wishes, as many writers do or to assume the role of a detached observer, as other writers do, including myself.

Journalism has been my life for the better part of the past three decades. During that time, I either reported or edited stories about the human condition, and sadly, too often about the unfortunate and sometimes cruel things people do to each other. I was never drawn to stories about government, civics or politicians. Make no mistake, I covered those topics *ad nauseum* during my career as a reporter and as an editor, but my heart always was in stories about people and their lives. The essence of all good stories is about the interaction among people – their loves, their conflicts and how they resolve these universal interactions.

Nicholas Lucente writes in his essay, *Creative Writing vs. Journalism* (p. 1):

When we discuss creative writing and journalism, people often think they are completely separate styles of writing. People don't think the two styles of writing have similarities, which for the most part is true. Creative writing is used when we are writing fiction, while journalistic writing describes news stories and real events. However, professional writers should not just be good at either one or the other. A professional writer should be comfortable writing both from a journalistic standpoint and a creative standpoint.

I made the decision when I was young that I wanted to report on people's lives. While at El Paso's St. Patrick Elementary School, we started a school newspaper about the school's events. That hand-written newspaper lasted one issue. However, I was hooked. Informing my community about what affects its members quickly became a sacred mission for me. And as I gained more experience, I found others like me whose life's work quickly became their mission. But writing is an evolution. It changes over time. My manuscript is a work of creative non-fiction that borrows from my journalistic background. And that experience made this manuscript stronger because my writing experience to date has been factually based.

Early in my journalistic career, I learned of a call via police radio of a murder-suicide that occurred on San Antonio's West Side, a primarily Hispanic and lower-income section of town. I was drawn to this story. I wanted to know who had died and what drove one person to kill another, and then kill himself. My editor, an old-fashioned newsman who in a previous life had been a police officer, ignored the story arguing that it was a domestic matter and it was not news. I disagreed with him, and never forgot that the taking of a life always is tragic and merits

attention and investigation. It deserves the public's attention. I wondered how many times has a life been taken – especially the life of the most vulnerable, but not reported because it fell under the heading of being “a domestic incident.” How many times have women died at the hands of abusive partners, but their story never sees the light of day because it was tossed aside under the guise of being domestic? Everyone's life deserves recognition, especially if that life is snuffed out prematurely or violently.

When the nation was attacked by terrorists on Sept. 11, 2001, more than 3,000 people were killed. Some of their remains were never found. The victims deserved to be recognized, their lives celebrated. They were fathers, mothers and sons and daughters of someone. They were loved and missed. The New York Times wrote a story on each of the victims in a series called “Portraits of Grief.” The stories in most cases weren't long, but most were accompanied by a photo of the victims. Their lives mattered.

Roy J. Harris Jr. wrote for Poynter, the journalistic institute and think tank:

But behind all the praise was an astounding combination of newsroom discipline and managerial talent under extreme pressure, along with inspiration from rank-and-file staffers. And how the editors packaged it all – that often-underrated element of journalism – helped fill a gaping hole in the psyche of New Yorkers, and all Americans, both with critical information and interpretation, and with a compassionate style.

I wondered how many times during my career – especially during the early days in my hometown of El Paso, Texas, as a reporter and eventually as an editor, that uncaring public

officials brushed off stories and refused to acknowledge them because they persuaded native or equally uncaring journalists about someone's death because they were "domestic" or a suicide.

The subject of my manuscript was among the 6,000 suicides committed by young people in the United States in 2017, according to the United Health Foundation. However, that number means nothing to most people. I decided to focus and write about one suicide – Josue Legarda.

Former Premier and dictator of the Soviet Union Josef Stalin once said:

"A million deaths is a statistic. But a single death is a tragedy."

FOCUS OF MY SUBJECT

My project is about Josue, a young man called Josh by his family and friends. He was a fun-loving 14-year-old whose mission in life was to make everyone laugh, make sure they felt like they mattered in his life, entertaining his friends. When he was younger, he was a chubby, video-playing kid who used to be so shy his mother would have to order for him at a fast-food restaurant because he was too timid to talk to restaurant workers behind the counter. Despite his young age, Josh became close friends with an Army veteran who lived in the same RV park. When Josh one day went to pick up the neighbor's dog for a walk, Josh walked in on the man inside his RV with a handgun in his mouth. The man wanted to kill himself. With understanding and patience, Josh talked the man out of killing himself. Josh was 12 years old at the time. Josh never told a soul, honoring the man's request for confidentiality.

With the influence of the Young Marines and his mother's live-in boyfriend, Daniel Smith, who became Josh's surrogate father, Josh grew into a confident and independent young man who learned to tackle any obstacle and care deeply for his friends. He grew physically as well. By the time he was 14 years old, he was 6 feet, 4 inches tall, and was the boy every girl fawned over and the boy every boy wanted as a friend.

On May 27, 2017, while his mother was in the hospital after a difficult appendectomy, Josh woke up early that morning. He headed out of the travel trailer where he lived and walked determinedly up an on-ramp to Interstate 10, El Paso's principal highway, before sunrise. After reaching the top of the interstate where it connected with another thoroughfare, he jumped from a height of 104 feet - 10 stories - to his death below. He was careful not to land in one of the east- or west-bound lanes and strike a car. He landed in the median therefore not endangering anyone

below. Josh thought of everything. In a note, he notified police of the passcode on his iPhone so they could see the chats he'd had with friends the night before. He also left a hand-written note for his mother. Josh hit the ground in such a way that his head was not impacted by the fall. His mother was able to have an open-casket funeral for her only son.

His mother, Gaby Almaraz, said during our first interview:

My worry was that I'm not going to see him, that I was not going to see my son's face one more time. It would kill me. And I thought it was going to be a closed casket. I mean I thought the worst. When James (a firefighter) came to see me, he said: "The only thing I can tell you is that it was God. His body is perfect."

Nothing happened to him. So after James left, I went into a deep sleep. I can tell you I saw the accident in my dream. It pretty much showed me the accident. God showed me two angels and they grabbed Josh. So that was my answer to why nothing happened to (his body).



Figure 1 Josh's mother, Gaby Almaraz, stares at the headlamp Josh wore the morning he died early that May morning just a few hundred feet from where he lived.

METHODOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

This project is about Josh's short life, his impact on other people's lives and the possible reasons that led him to end his life so abruptly.

While my thesis is a work of creative non-fiction, I was true to my journalistic training. I wanted to seek the truth as much as I could discern it and interviewed 19 people. I interviewed Josh's mother, adoptive step-father, RV park residents, five members of the Young Marines, five friends, two mothers of friends and others. I spent nearly eight hours interviewing Gaby during four in-person sessions and many texting messages to get her thoughts about her son and why he decided to end his life. I also worked closely with the El Paso Police Department, collecting a number of reports from them, and the El Paso County Medical Examiner's Office. Among the reports provided to me were screen shots of some of the conversations Josh had via cell phone chat with friends the night before he died, telling a number of friends he was going to kill himself. He had these conversations while visiting his mother in her hospital room the night before he died.

I was trained to be a journalist at the University of Texas at El Paso and through a series of successful internships I learned my craft. I also worked during every holiday break I could at the now defunct El Paso Herald-Post newspaper where I applied what I was taught as an undergraduate and I learned in the real world. I was blessed with a strong group of professors who showed me the proper way to be a journalist – be honest, be ethical and most of all to care.

Empathy was one of the most important traits a journalist can have. It can't be taught. I am fortunate that empathy is an emotional trait I possess. My sources became more than unknown characters in my stories. I cared for every one of the people I ever interviewed. And

because of that empathy, the people I talked to provided me with details many journalists would not have been provided. As a journalist, I had to empathize, while not getting too close. A homicide detective taught me once how he managed to remove himself and not get caught up in the emotion of the family's grief. He said: "My job is not to grieve who was killed. My job is to solve the victim's homicide and provide closure for the families." I adopted that philosophy early in my career, but still manage to remain empathetic.

But successful interviewing is far more than just empathy. Asking difficult questions, such as in this manuscript, takes skill. Questions must be open-ended, time must be afforded for people to ponder and provide their answers, interviews can't be rushed and care must be given to how questions are asked.

In *Creative Interviewing* (p. 19-20), author Ken Metzler provides a guideline on how to interview people where difficult questions have to be asked. He talks about asking what he refers to the "bomb," or the most difficult question in an interview.

Most truly comprehensive interviews involve questions of a threatening nature.

They must be asked if the interview is to be thorough. A personality profile would be incomplete without discussion of the subject's negative traits...Having laid the groundwork, you must proceed gently toward the sensitive area often by indirection.

Only one friend took Josh's comments so seriously that he went to his home to check on him. I interviewed Damian Salcido twice for a total of nearly three hours. Interviewing Damian

was critical to this story. He tried to save Josh. Reaching out to him was difficult for me. I knew I had to ask him about his attempt to save his best friend, and how those efforts were unsuccessful. It was among the most compelling interviews I had and I am grateful for his candor and time.

The camera also is an important tool in my arsenal. I've used images here of the principal characters. The pathos shown by Gaby, Dan and Damian in these photos can't be ignored.

I tried to make Gaby and Daniel Smith as unaware of the camera as much as possible, keeping them talking while I took their pictures. I tried to be as unassuming, never posed them and took the images as quickly as I could so they would be less conscious of the camera nearby. We resumed our conversations quickly after photos were taken. I tried to be a fly on the wall.

Damian provided me with the image shown here.



Figure 2 Damian Salcido, one of Josh Legarda's best friends, visits Josh's grave and prior to having a headstone. The gravestone had not been placed at the time of the photo.

One of the most revealing interviews I had was with Daniel Smith, the former live-in boyfriend of Josh's mother and a man Josh figuratively adopted as his step-father. He was the second person notified by police that Josh had died. He suffered as if he had been Josh's natural father and continues to grieve Josh's death. He remains haunted by the letter left behind.

Smith told me during our second interview:

The letter was five pages long. He wrote it that (morning). I'm kinda weird. I care too much. After it happened, I went on a search. I wanted answers. He didn't wear shoes because I would have heard the shoes on the floor of the RV. He only wore his socks. I found where he jumped the wall (surrounding the RV park). I found where he wrote the letter. I know where he sat. You could see where he sat down and his feet made marks in the sand. You could see where he was crying. He wore a miner's light (a battery-operated light on an elastic headband). He wore that when he wrote the letter. I know because I followed his path after it happened. I could tell you where he jumped. I saw everything (the steps Josh took). He wrote the letter early that morning. I went to bed at 1 a.m. He waited about 40 minutes. He got his hoodie and his notebook. When I woke up, he wasn't here. I woke up about 5. The sun was still down. When he got up, he never went to the restroom here, he used the RV (park's) restroom. He would get up, go shower, he set his own alarm. I just thought he got his stuff and went to shower. Fuck where is he? I went over to the restroom and now I'm getting mad. I went to see (the RV's maintenance man) Nacho. Somebody had to know something and then I got the

call. They had to tell Gaby first. If I stand in my front porch, I can see where Josh jumped.



Figure 3 Daniel Smith stands where Josh is believed to have jumped a rock wall and then double-backed to the Interstate 10 westbound onramp. Smith is pointing to the where Josh walked on to the freeway. Behind Smith is where Josh jumped.

The collection of all this information was time-consuming. I used a program called Dragon to help transcribe so much material, but it proved to be rather inconsistent and I was forced to rely on transcribing each conversation myself. It took about 2.5 hours to transcribe each hour of interview. I performed most of the work over the summer 2020, dipping into spring 2021. My work was divided about 60 percent transcription to about 40 percent writing the manuscript.

Each person I interviewed was honest and candid. I was successful because I immersed myself in their thoughts, feelings and grief. Every interview was tough. It was not easy as an information-gatherer to talk to all these people. Every one of them broke down emotionally. It was hard for me not to break down as well. During my first interview with Gaby, she broke down several times. Talking about the loss of your only son who killed himself while she was powerless to do anything was extremely difficult. And it was tough for me. Of course, my shared grief could not compare to hers, but the veneer that keeps me emotionally safe nearly crashed. Listening to Josh's former Young Marines commander begin to cry when discussing how he stood guard over Josh's casket during the funeral was just as hard. I had developed a wall to shield myself from the emotion of others while dealing with stories about tragedy, but this was close to the heart, far closer than any other work I've done. While I could not experience their grief, my empathy was my greatest tool to get the information I needed to tell Josh's story.

Renato Rosaldo writes in his essay *Grief and the Headhunter's Rage* (p. 123):

All interpretations are provisional; they are made by positioned subjects who are prepared to know certain things and now others. Good ethnographers, knowledgeable and sensitive, fluent in the language, and able to move easily in an alien cultural world, still have their limits and their analyses always are incomplete.

Gaps exist in all interviews. Subjects are guarded and question the interviewers' motives. I've spoken about how all my subjects were candid, but I'm certain only to a point. Gaby never showed me Josh's suicide note. After talking to Dan and Josh's sister, Vianey, the note was not

especially revealing. It talked about the distribution of his possessions, he gave no reason for his motives. All interviews are incomplete. I'm sure I didn't learn the complete story, but I am confident I learned as complete a story as I could learn. I asked everyone I interviewed for their best theory as why Josh killed himself. I'm sure the subjects kept their theories to themselves, but I am satisfied that I probed as much as I could and tried to get the best answers I could. One of those subjects was Destiny Aguirre.

Destiny was the object of Josh's strong affection. He wanted to have a romantic relationship with her, but she was 15 years old, in high school, and Josh was nearly 14 and in middle school. Destiny's mother had made it clear to Josh that Destiny couldn't date. Additionally, Destiny simply didn't have romantic feelings for him. During an outing to Las Cruces, N.M., to see the Harlem Globetrotters play, Destiny's mother saw Josh put his arm around Destiny. The mother asked Destiny to talk to Josh and put a stop to his romantic overtures.

Destiny told me:

I remember that I said something like "I don't see you that way." Josh said he cared about me. We were both crying at the end of that. I thought at the end of it that the conversation went well and that he would be part of my life. I guess it didn't go too well for him. I was 15, he was 13 and a half years old. There were lots of tears from both of us. We hugged each other goodbye. He wiped his eyes and went downstairs. His family left. I talked to Mom. I knew she would have asked me if I'd talked to him. I told her I did. She was pleased. I tried to reach out to Josh afterward, but he didn't have a cell phone at that time. I really had no way

of contacting him. I know my mom invited them to come over, but they didn't show. I thought we were fine. It made me think that we weren't OK. I was disappointed. We had been friends at least two years. I wasn't able to go back to Texas for the funeral. I hated it. I absolutely hated it. I couldn't go back. It was very hard. I wanted to be at the funeral. I haven't been back to El Paso since. I'd like to visit Josh's grave. It's going to hurt when I see it. But I want to be there. I feel badly about the conversation. I just wish that hadn't been our last conversation.

Each of the people I interviewed was close to Josh. Some expressed anger at the fact that the night before Josh killed himself, he texted a number of his friends via a chat room and as well as individually that he was going to kill himself. He used an Instagram chat room. Some of the people in the chat room asked Josh to keep his phone on so they could see him commit suicide. Only Damian and his mother went to check on Josh. Josh emerged from the RV after Dan opened the door when Damian checked on him. Josh said the texts were just a joke to get attention. It wasn't. It was a warning and by morning, Josh was dead. Several friends called Josh's mother the next morning to check on him. They were too late.

Damian, the closest friend, expressed regret at Josh's death:

I do wish he was here with me so I could talk to him. "You're my brother." I have not found a close friend, not like him. No. I've been trying, believe me. The connection – just acting like brothers. No one has been able to match what he did.

Josh's death was a tragedy. Everyone who knew him grieved for him, regretting he would never graduate from high school, attend college and have children – any of the typical things people experience during their lives. Everyone I interviewed cried at some point when recalling Josh's impact on their lives. Every one of them.

Writer Earl A. Grollman wrote:

Grief is not a disorder, a disease or a sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical and spiritual necessity, the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is to grieve.

REACHING FOR CLOSURE

Everyone I interviewed is still grieving. Gaby goes to her son's gravesite nearly every weekend, usually accompanied by her daughter Vianey. Dan cries whenever he talks about Josh. Destiny recalls Josh fondly and takes out the necklace he gave her, but cries when she recalls their final conversation. Damian is angry, but tears up at the mere mention about Josh's death. They're all grieving three years after Josh's suicide.

I never met Josh, but grieve for him nonetheless. I have to watch my emotional distance. As mentioned earlier, my role is not to mourn Josh, but to tell his story. Not writing about Josh's life, and how he died, would be a disservice. His life had meaning, but so did his death and the impact on those left behind.

I'm reminded a lesson taught by Barbara Allen of the Poynter Institute in *Writing about death is one of the hardest, most valuable things journalists do – here's how to do it correctly* that I read during my research:

First and foremost, understand that writing about a person who has died is important and meaningful. You cannot skip this part of the job because it's intimidating. Telling stories of people's lives and death is a way that journalism connects humanity, and that's more important than ever.

Gay Talese, clearly one of the most recognized creative writers with a journalism background, told us it was critical to immerse ourselves into our story. I have, but with caution. I couldn't get caught up in the grief.

As I mentioned, this manuscript borrows from my journalistic experience, as demonstrated by all the interviews I conducted. However, the manuscript is the culmination of interviews conducted about an event three years ago.

In many instances, dialogue had to be recreated based on the interviews. On other occasions, dialogue and depictions of events were created based on the best recollection of the people interviewed. I used creative non-fiction methods to create those moments as best I could imagine to follow the mantra of what Washington Post reporter and editor Bob Woodward calls: “The best obtainable version of the truth.”

Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* was among the first of the “non-fiction novels” to be published. Capote used extensive interviews and official documents to produce his groundbreaking book that chronicled the 1959 slayings of four family members in a small Kansas town. Capote spent months gathering information, interviewing people to produce his book. Relying on the recollection of those he interviewed, he compiled 8,000 pages of notes. And relying on the recollection of his interviewees, including the two men convicted of the crime, he recreated dialogue woven with his interpretation to tell his story.

Capote moves the story forward through the use of dialogue, sometimes foreshadowing events about to take place. He also adds a sense of realism by using people’s words to tell the story.

Gene Lee Newgaard (p. 13) writes that:

From the perspective of “New Journalism,” the blending of fiction writing techniques with journalistic writing is almost identical to blending techniques used to define it. Capote makes the use of extended dialogue throughout the book

as well as scene-by-scene construction, and he documents details such as psychiatric reports on his killers.”

The recreation of dialogue was one of the most challenging aspects of my work. I reached for the truth as best as I could ascertain it, based on the many interviews I conducted. In most instances, the recollection of my sources on certain events matched. Where they didn’t match exactly, I chose the most likely scenario and wrote based on the most logical version of events.

I always asked my sources to recall events and dialogue wherever possible. Their recollections were helpful. But I didn’t rely solely on their memory. I used my own critical analysis to depict events.

Philip Gerard writes in his book *Creative Nonfiction: Researching and Crafting Stories of Real Life* (p. 9):

Creative nonfiction contains a sense of reflection on the part of the author. The underlying subject has been percolating through the writer’s imagination for some time, waiting for the right outlet. It is finished thought.

MAJOR INFLUENCES

Some of the most efficient writing I've read as part of the MFA program is poetry. Poetry taught me many lessons and it has been my inspiration in this challenge. One of the most influential poets for me has been Charles Baudelaire. He used his observational powers coupled with his prose to inform and educate his readers in what I call creative nonfiction poetry. He also used his poetry as a call to action. In one of landmark poems, he instructs his readers to savor their lives to the fullest. He's clear, concise and in addition to being precise, he calls for people to "Be Drunken (p. 183)."

Be always drunken. Nothing else matters: this is the only question. If you would not feel the horrible burden of Time weighing on your shoulders and crushing you to the earth, be drunken continually. Drunken with what? With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you will. Be drunken.

Baudelaire was a modernist despite writing in the mid-1800s and he had a deep influence on poets and other writers who followed him. He also had a deep impact on me in my poetics. His powers of observation were keen. His ability to translate what he saw into words was equally notable. I did not expect poetry to have such an impact on me, but it did.

Randall Stepp, who lost his son to suicide found solace and healing in writing about this son's death by sharing Brandon's story through the poem "My Son (p. 26):"

My son was more/than some sad story.

Or cruel life lesson/to show God's glory.
He was my whole life, my source of joy.
Such a beautiful soul/he was my boy.
Don't judge his life by a single mistake.
Which in the wrong situation, anyone could make.
Keep his spirit with us, don't let suicide erase.
All the priceless memories/of his smiling face.
So, please say his name often/he was a person kind and true.
Tragedy is not selective, next time it could be you.

Poetry can be powerful through its economy. There's no room for waste. Each word has to be chosen carefully and not a single syllable can be out of place. This is a hallmark of journalistic writing as well.

William Zinsser writes in *On Writing Well* (p. 7-8):

The secret to good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components. Every word that serves no function, every long word that could be a short word, every adverb that carries the same meaning that's already in a verb, every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure of who is doing what – these are the thousand and one adulterants that weaken the strength of the sentence. And they usually occur, ironically, in proportion and rank.

Creative non-fiction calls for economical writing, not wasting the reader's time with unnecessary clutter, and excellent word choice. My manuscript is open to interpretation, but the events portrayed are real. The manuscript was approached as if it were a novel.

Gerard further writes in *Creative Nonfiction: Researching and Crafting Stories of Real Life* (p. 5):

The hardest part of writing creative nonfiction is that you're stuck with what really happened – you can't make it up. You can be as artful as you want in the presentation, draw profound meanings out of your subject matter, but you are still stuck with real people and real events. You're stuck with stories that don't always turn out the way you wish they had turned out.

While Gerard is making a valid point as creative nonfiction writer, we are stuck with the material we're presented if we indeed want to write with credibility and authority, we are not shackled.

Madison Smartt Bell writes in *Narrative Design* (p. 213):

The task of the writer is to shape the material. The writer models all unitary mass of information in the same way a sculptor models a blob of clay or carves a block of stone. Perhaps there is something in the mass to begin with that suggests the form the artist will give it.

There was a mass of material for me to digest, collate, organize and present. The events surrounding Josh's life are real and are depicted to the best of my interviewee's recollection. Sometimes events differed slightly when people recalled the same event.

The discipline of this creative nonfiction is relatively new, launched by among others, Capote in the 1960s. Creative nonfiction has been widely accepted by the public as seen with the readership of *In Cold Blood*, *Helter Skelter* through books written by Woodward recently.

Robert S. Boynton writes in *The New New Journalism* (xxv):

That nonfiction – not the novel – had become the most important literature being written in America today.

He further writes that some of the most widely known writers such as Tom Wolfe, Susan Orlean and others (xi-xvi):

Represent the continued maturation of American literary journalism. They use the license of experiment with form earned by the New Journalists of the sixties to address the social and political concerns of (the) nineteenth century... The New Journalism uses complete dialogue, rather than the snippets quoted in daily journalism; proceeds scene by scene, much as in a movie; incorporates varying points of view, rather than telling a story solely from the perspective of the narrator; pays close attention to status details about the appearance and behavior of its characters.

I've told Josh's story in my manuscript. That's not enough. I'd like a broader audience to read about Josh, his life, his family and how for reasons no one can ascertain, he killed himself. He was a bright young man who made everyone laugh. He was the person people turned to when they needed to be cheered up.

This work is finished, but not complete. I have presented the best obtainable version of the truth about Josh's short life, his impact on those who loved him and how everyone is trying to move forward. But I believe that with a bit more time and distance, more information will reveal itself. The story will become even closer to completion. I plan to continue to work on this project even after it is reviewed by this committee.

My goal for this manuscript is that it becomes a book. I will begin an earnest search for a publisher soon. If that effort falls short, I will self-publish. Josh's story has to be told.



Figure 4 Josue "Josh" Legarda January 9, 2003- May 27, 2017

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Josue

Chapter 1 - Military Code of Honor – 2016

Josue “Josh” Legarda always was hustling. As he slowly grew out of his shyness and more comfortable at the Mission RV Park where he lived with his mother and her boyfriend, he took on odd jobs, helping the maintenance man install an irrigation system, cleaning up people’s yards, mowing what little grass grew in the sandy soil at the Far East El Paso park and his favorite was walking people’s dogs.

He loved meeting his neighbors and quickly got to know many of them, and they got to know, care and respect him. Josh often was seen walking many of the park’s dogs throughout the park along the perimeter of the property early in the morning and as the sun was setting. He was busy for being a 12-year-old.

Most of the residents were on long-term leases although the 186-site park did have other tenants who were there on short terms or even overnight.

Josh had plans. He wanted to be a Marine. His favorite video game was “Call of Duty,” a military-based video game. He wanted to serve his country since he was young and quickly bonded with James Carmichael, an Army veteran who served two tours in Iraq and another in Afghanistan. James was about 5 feet, 5 inches tall and had a facial injury due to a grenade. James, a staff sergeant, respected Josh so much that he gave him a key to pick up his dog Gabriel anytime he wanted to take him out for a walk. Josh’s mother, Gaby Almaraz, often reminded her only son about the responsibility of taking care of people’s beloved pets. “Don’t worry, Mom. I’m good,” he told her.

One late afternoon, Josh reached for a set of keys and put on his beloved Air Jordan sneakers. “Where are you going, mijo?”

“I’m going to walk Gabriel.” Gabriel was James’ dog.

“Be careful,” the vigilant mother said.

James, who was 29 years old, and needed someone to take care of Gabriel when he was on duty, out of town or for any variety of reasons.

“Gabriel doesn’t like men,” James told Josh once. “But he sure likes you. He’s a good judge of character.”

They talked about military life, leadership, the camaraderie soldiers shared. “You take care of them so they can take care of you,” James told Josh.

Josh didn’t want to hear about bombs going off or killing people. He wanted to hear about training, surviving a war and being a leader.

Josh walked the 300 feet or so to James’ RV and walked up the steps. He pulled the key from his pocket and opened the door. Gabriel greeted Josh at the door.

“Hello, Gabriel. James are you home?”

Josh heard no reply. The living room was dark with only a single lamp on at the other side of the room, but he could see James sitting in a chair. It was too dark to make out what James was doing so Josh got closer.

James had a gun in his mouth and his right index finger was on the trigger. James didn’t say a word. He was crying. Next to him was a bottle of tequila and on the kitchen table was a bottle of vodka.

Josh approached James. “Josh, go home,” James said in a muffled voice. “Get out of here. I’m better off.”

“Why James? Why should I leave? You’re my inspiration and I’m going to stay right here.” Josh moved closer to James. He continued to cry and tears ran down his cheeks. He didn’t let go of his handgun.

Josh moved to get closer. He sat next to James. “I’m right here, James. You’re not alone.”

Josh remained next to James for a few minutes. Neither of them said anything. James continued to cry.

“James, I’m going to try something. Please don’t move.”

Using his right hand, Josh reached for James’ right hand and gently lowered the gun. He took the gun from James’ hand and set it down on the floor. James continued to sob. Josh took a deep breath and started to tremble.

“I was supposed to go to Hawaii and I came home to an empty house. My wife is divorcing me. I had to cancel my orders.” He cradled his face in his hands. “Luckily, Fort Bliss took me.”

After a few minutes, James reached for Josh and hugged him. “Thank you, Josh. You saved my life. I owe you, man. I was about to pull that goddamn trigger. What you did was brave. You have giant balls.” James continued to cry into his hands.

“James, I admire you. I’m going to be here all night. Is that OK? Gabriel and I will be right here with you. You’re not alone. We love you.”

“Please don’t tell your mother about this. She’ll never let you come back to visit or walk Gabriel.”

“Don’t worry, man. Military code of honor.”

Josh stayed until after midnight. When he arrived home, a worried Gaby asked him where he'd been.

“James and I were up talking, Mom. Good night.”

Chapter 2 - May 27, 2017

Lucy Turcotte parked the minivan at the entrance of the RV park. Her 14-year-old son Damian Salcido jumped out of the van and banged on the first door he saw. “Hello, hello! Does Josh live here?” he yelled in desperation. An angry man opened the door. “What do you want?” he shouted at Damian. “Do you know what time it is? It’s after midnight.”

“I’m so sorry, but it’s important,” Damian said. The man slammed the door.

“I need to find Josh. I don’t know where he lives,” Damian said. He ran to another RV and with a closed fist banged on that door. “Do you know where Josh lives?” he yelled breathlessly. He didn’t get an answer. Damian ran to another RV and banged on its door, asking the same question. He continued down the row, banging on doors randomly until a security guard on a golf cart approached him.

“What are you doing? You’re disturbing the residents.”

“I’m sorry to bother people, but I’m looking for Josh.”

“This must be very important.”

“It is sir. I wouldn’t be waking people up. I’m so sorry. It’s urgent. I think he’s killed himself,” Damian said.

“He’s in that unit over there,” the guard said, pointing to Josh’s RV.

Damian ran to Josh’s RV as his mother approached in the minivan. By the time she put the minivan in park, Damian had run up the four steps to the RV’s front door. “Josh, open the door! Open the door, Josh!”

Dan Smith, a 6-foot tall man with colorful tattoos running from his right shoulder to his wrist opened the door. He was standing in a T-shirt and his underwear. “What’s this all about?”

“I’m looking for Josh,” Damian said, catching his breath.

Josh stepped outside from behind Dan. “What do you want, Damian? What’s so important?”

“Motherfucker, what do you mean? You texted me you were going to kill yourself. How could you think to do that? I hate you.”

“I was just kidding, man. I didn’t mean anything by it,” Josh said. “I just wanted to tell a joke.”

“That was one sick fucking prank, man. I don’t believe you. I think you’re lying. I think that you’re serious. You’re a liar.” Damian pushed Josh so hard that he fell to the ground.

Lucy saw that heated discussion and ran out the car. “What are you doing Damian. He’s your best friend.”

“You think you can come here and fuck with my family,” Dan said, breaking up the two. “What is this about?”

“Mom, you read the texts he sent me. He says he was just joking and was not serious. Some motherfucking joke, you asshole. I love you and I care about you,” Damian pushed Josh down as soon as he tried to stand back up. Josh didn’t fight back. He just looked ahead with a blank stare.

“Were you joking, Josh?” Lucy asked Josh. Josh didn’t answer. He just continued to look ahead.

“Tell me Josh, were you kidding?” Damian asked.

“What the fuck is going on out here? It’s after midnight. What were you doing here, Damian?” Dan yelled.

“It’s Josh, Dan. He’s going to kill himself.”

“I give you everything you want and you want to commit suicide. What the fuck is he talking about, Josh.”

“Nothing, I was just joking about something. We’re fighting about a girl,” Josh responded.

“No, we’re not. You liar. Fuck you, Josh. He’s going to kill himself, Dan,” Damian said through his tears.

“I don’t like this drama. You’re disturbing the neighborhood. This ain’t happening at my house. You guys better shut this down.”

“No, I’m not going to kill myself, Dad.” Josh looked Dan straight in the eye.

“You’ve never lied to me before, Josh. Tell me the truth,” Dan said.

“No, I’m not. We’re just fighting about a girl.”

“You’re a liar,” Damian said.

“Damian why are you here?”

“Ask Josh. Ask Josh what he was texting me earlier.”

“What did you text, Josh,” Dan demanded. “Tell me. Why is Damian here?”

“Yea, Josh. Tell him you texted me you wanted to kill yourself tonight,” Damian said.

Josh didn’t respond. “Josh, answer me.”

“Dad, I texted a joke. I wanted to get some attention so I said I was going to kill myself. It’s not true. I just wanted some attention from my friends,” Josh said. He looked down as he spoke. “I’m so sorry, Dan. I’m sorry, Damian and Mrs. Turcotte. I’m sorry I scared you. I was just trying to get some attention.”

“That’s your idea of a joke, Josh?” Dan asked with a puzzled look. “Look at what you’ve done. I bet all of your friends are scared for you right now. Your friends love you. The fact is, Damian is here. They left where ever they were to check on you. That’s sick, Josh.”

“I’m so sorry, Dad.” Josh continued to look at the ground, his voice trailing.

“Are you telling the truth, Josh? We love you very much and there’s no reason for you to do anything like this.”

“I know, Dad.”

“I don’t believe you, Josh. I think you’re lying now,” Damian said.

“I’m telling the truth. Believe me.”

Dan scratched his head, looked at Damian and his mother. “I think we’re done here. Josh, don’t you ever do this again. Let’s all go to bed. We’ll talk about this tomorrow.” Damian was resigned to Dan’s comments.

“I hope you have fun at your new school,” Damian said. He turned his back on Josh and walked away. Damian knew he would never see Josh again.

“OK, Mom, let’s go home.” Lucy got into the driver’s side of the mini-van, checked on her newborn in the rear seat and Damian got into the passenger seat. Lucy drove away.

Damian called Jocelyn. “He’s still alive. I saw him. He is alive and his dad was there. His mom is in the hospital. He’s OK,” Damian said.

“OK, thanks for calling.”

But Damian had his doubts. He didn’t believe Josh. He was certain Josh was lying and he managed to persuade Dan.

“Mom, I don’t believe him. You read the texts. He wasn’t kidding, Mom,” Damian said.

“We’ve done all we can do. Let’s go home. Say a prayer for Josh.”

Dan decided not to wait until morning and faced Josh as they were getting back into the RV. “Josh, so that’s what you were doing when we were in the hospital room with your mother. What were you thinking? I’ve got a kid coming here at midnight, a fight in front of the neighbors. What were you thinking? We have to get up early to visit your mother,” Dan said.

“I wasn’t thinking, Dad. I’m sorry. I just wanted to get a little attention.”

“This better be nothing more than that, Josh. You’ve never lied to me before. I hope you’re not lying now.”

“I’m not, Dad. Let’s go to sleep.”

Josh walked up the few steps up to the home’s front door and walked inside, followed by Dan. Dan closed the door. “Sit down, Josh.” Josh sat on the couch in the living room. The cushions enveloped Josh as he sat down.

“Josh, we love you so much. I don’t know what we’d do without you. Your Mom would just die if something happened to you. Are you OK?”

“Yea, I’m fine Dad. I’m sorry I tried to pull off a stupid prank. I just wanted to get some attention. It was wrong.”

“Is there something we should know, Josh?”

“Dad, I’m fine,” Josh said, looking directly at his surrogate father. Josh’s voice didn’t waver.

“Are you having girl problems?” Josh smiled as Dan finished the question.

“Dad, I’m fine. I have no girl problems. All’s cool. Remember the waitress.” Dan smiled.

“Don’t you do anything stupid, Josh.”

Chapter 3 - Hours earlier

It was getting late. The sun had kissed the Franklin Mountains good night two hours earlier, quickly bringing darkness to East El Paso. Visiting hours had ended at RE Thomason General Hospital, but some family members stuck around, chatting with Gaby Almaraz. But Gaby needed her rest. She had undergone a painful appendectomy, compounded by diabetes – an operation she had delayed until the last possible moment. Dan, a construction superintendent, had to say his goodbyes. Gaby lay in her bed, her head propped by a vertical pillow, pleased to see him at her side. Dan was sweet and attentive, spending a great deal of time in the hospital room, keeping her company.

“Honey, I need to get some sleep or I’ll never leave the hospital,” she told him. “Thanks for coming.” Dan spent the previous night with her in a hospital room chair. They’d been together four years after meeting on an online dating site.

Gaby’s only son, 14-year-old Josh, also spent the previous night with her, sleeping on a blanket on the floor. Josh was not about to leave his mother the night before her surgery. “No way Mom. I’ll sleep on the floor if I have to. Dan can take the chair.”

Josh grabbed a blanket, making himself comfortable on the floor. Dan sat in the hospital chair. It extended and Dan was comfortable as well, for a hospital room.

Dan and Josh spent the entire day of the surgery waiting with Gaby at the hospital. They watched TV, chatted about random topics and just kept each other company to pass the time. Dan did most of the talking. Josh was on his recently acquired hand-me-down iPhone, texting to both a chat room with friends, and with his best friend Damian. Dan looked at Josh and then looked at Gaby who was back in her room some time after the surgery, giving her a glance and a

shrug at Josh's inattentiveness, especially compared to the previous night when he stayed with his mother.

Dan reached to give Gaby a goodnight kiss and say his goodbyes. "Josh, we're leaving. Say goodnight to your mother," Dan said. Josh put the phone in his pocket and approached his mother. Josh was the epitome of a good son and a member of the Young Marines. He stood 6 feet, four inches tall and said he would eventually like to serve his country. He knew so since he was five years old. Gaby was proud of her son and all he'd accomplished at such a young age. She looked at him with pride and told him it was time to go home.

"You know that I love you," he told his mother.

"Of course, I do."

Josh started to walk out of the room, stopping at the doorway. He walked back to Gaby's bed. Josh's voice changed. He spoke more forcefully. "No, you know that I love you, right?" Josh emphasized, looking directly into her eyes. He stood behind the tight space next to the bed's headboard and IV drip cables, and kissed the top of her head. "I love you."

"Yes, mijo. Go home," Gaby told him. She thought Josh's actions were odd and thought of what Josh meant. "I love you, too. I'll see you tomorrow. Maybe I'll get to go home."

Josh walked out of the room with Dan. They took the elevator to the ground floor and walked toward Dan's pickup. "She's going to be all right, right?" Tears welled in Josh's eyes.

"Of course, she is. She just shouldn't have waited so long for her surgery. Being diabetic is complicating things a bit, but she'll be fine," Dan said, leaning forward toward Josh with determination. "What was all that about? Are you worried?"

"No, not really. Maybe about her diabetes, though. She's had that a long time."

“Josh, that was a little odd, what you did, saying goodbye to her the way you did. Are you OK? It sounds to me like you’re worried.”

“No, I just miss Mom so much. The house feels empty without her. She hasn’t been home in days. Sure, we see her in the hospital, but it’s not the same. I want her home. She is in so much pain.”

“She’ll be home in a day or two,” Dan said. Josh never looked at Dan. He kept his gaze looking out the windshield, lost in his thoughts.

“Josh, what was all that with the phone? Who were you texting so much while your mother was lying in bed? You were completely absent. We were there to visit her, not be on the phone texting,” Dan said, raising his voice a bit.

“No one in particular. I don’t have phone service and the hospital has good wi-fi so I took advantage of it and texted a few friends, Damian and people like that.”

“You should have been visiting with your mother, not texting Damian and your chat room friends. Give me your phone. No more texting for you tonight,” Dan said with a scowl on his face, raising his voice to quiet yell. Josh felt guilty now that Dan pointed out his inattention to his mother, but he had to text to his friends.

“But Dan, I can only chat where there’s wi-fi. I don’t have phone service. The hospital had good wi-fi,” Josh argued.

“Give me your phone. Enough.”

“Dad, that sure was fun tonight, before we went to visit Mom,” Josh said, changing the subject.

Dan and Josh had prepared to go visit Gaby after having a restful day. There'd been plenty of household stress with Gaby in the hospital and uncertainty about how she'd do in the operation. Luckily, the surgery was a success and she was fine. Dan had an idea. "Hey Butthole," Dan said using his term of endearment for Josh. "I have an idea. How would you like to go look at some chi-chis? Let's go have dinner at Twin Peaks, my favorite breastraunt," Dan asked.

Josh's eyes lit up. "You bet. I'm hungry," Josh responded.

"I bet you are. We need a break. Your Mom is going to be OK, but she gave it a bit of scare. This is a nice thing to do, don't you think?"

"Do we have to tell Mom," Josh asked, jokingly.

"I'm sure she won't mind, Josh. We've been there once before." Dan smiled.

Josh liked girls, and they liked him. His circle of close girlfriends was growing and he was happy that he had grown from a shy, pudgy video-playing nerd to a tall young man who often captured the attention of young women. At one time, he was so shy, he couldn't bring himself to lift his head and order at a McDonald's. He'd tell his mother what he wanted and she would order for him. Now, Josh was the toast of the town with his Marines physique and military haircut. His daily regime of running around the perimeter of the RV park and other exercises had served him well, as well as the exercises he did during his time with the Young Marines and after he left the group. He stood erect, keeping his frame facing skyward.

The restaurant wasn't far from the hospital, and close to the El Paso International Airport. They arrived at Twin Peaks after a short drive west in Interstate 10. Josh was thrilled at the prospect of a tasty meal and seeing attractive waitresses. He loved the girls and cared about the ones in his intimate circle, but didn't see them the same way he saw Twin Peaks waitresses. The

waitresses were grown up, college-age and every one of them was beautiful. They were greeted at the door by a young lady who took them to their seats.

“Wow,” Josh exclaimed. “Thanks for coming here, Dad. This is a nice break from everything.”

“I thought we needed a break. Your Mom is going to be OK after she gave us a bit of a scare.” They reviewed the menu filled with typical American fare-chicken wings, burgers, fries and other items to make an all-American boy happy, all the while taking occasional glances at the beautiful girls who waited on tables. The waitresses wore white shorts, red low-cut blouses tied in the front just above the waist, and showed ample cleavage and friendly smiles. Josh was surrounded by beautiful women. He was in his element. Josh ordered the usual – loaded nachos.

Their hot plates arrived a few minutes later. Their waitress, no more than 21 years old, started chatting up Josh. “What’s your name?” the conversation began and before long, she offered Josh her phone number. She used a blank receipt and wrote down her number. Josh looked older than his 14 years because of his tight physique and military buzz cut. The waitress had no way of guessing his age.

“Thanks. I’ll call you.” It was the first time a waitress had offered her number to Josh.

“Josh, you’re a good-looking kid. This won’t be the last time that happens,” Dan said.

“Can you believe that, Dad. That’s crazy,” Josh said, waving the number as if he had just captured an enemy’s flag.

“She’s going to ask you to tear that up.”

“Who, Mom? I’m not going to tell her,” Josh quipped. He took a few moments to giggle, knowing how Gaby protected her good-looking son from the clutches of enthusiastic young ladies.

They visited Gaby at the hospital and then went home.

They arrived home after a short drive to the RV park where the family shared a home. They lived in a 40-foot long, comfortable RV that offered them everything they needed. Dan chose to live in an RV because the rent was low, his overhead wasn't much and he would have funds to have enjoyable weekends out of town.

"What time are you going to bed?" Dan asked.

"I don't know. I'm a little nervous about Mom. I almost wish I had spent the night with her, again. I feel so bad for her. She's been a great Mom."

"We can't spend every night at the hospital. Besides, she's out of the woods now. She's had the operation and she's recovering very nicely," Dan said. He put his arm around Josh and hugged his presumptive son tightly. Dan knew how much Gaby's only son loved her and tried to quell Josh's fears.

"Still, I worry so much about her."

"She going to be fine."

"I'm going to my room. I love you Dad, I guess," Josh told Dan, as he customarily did.

"Goodnight, Butthole. I love you, too." Josh looked at the clock on the dining room wall. It was almost midnight and Dan would be asleep in an hour or two, he thought. Josh went to his room at the front-end of the RV. He thought about his mother, Dan and his sister, Vianey. Vianey was a little more than seven years older than him and moved to San Diego soon after graduating from high school with a friend. Vianey wanted a new life, far away from El Paso and her own personal pain.

Chapter 4 - Where's Damian

Lucy hadn't seen her son Damian for more than an hour since shortly arriving at her niece's quinceañera earlier that evening. She began looking for him throughout the banquet hall, but couldn't find him. "Have you seen Damian?" she asked one friend. Lucy held her newborn in her arms while looking for him.

"No, I haven't since you two walked in. What was that, two hours ago?"

"Have you seen my son?" she asked someone else and got the same response – shrugged shoulders.

"I bet he's on his phone where he gets a good signal. You know these teenagers.

"I bet you're right. I appreciate it."

Lucy thought the best signal is going to be outside the hall's walls. She headed for the front door to look for Damian.

Chapter 5 - Josh texts Damian

“I can’t do this anymore,” Josh texted Damian.

Damian immediately called Josh, but he didn’t answer the phone. He called again, and again. Each time, the phone just rang and Josh wouldn’t answer. “Pick up the phone right fucking now!” Damian yelled at the message recorder. “I love you. Call me. You’re the brother I never had. Call me. Talk to me,” Damian texted, but Josh didn’t text back. Damian continued to text, but nothing.

Damian called mutual friend Jacqueline.

“What’s up?”

“Text Josh, Jacqueline, immediately. Just do it,” Damian demanded.

“I’m not going to do it until you tell me what’s going on.”

As he spoke to Jacqueline, Josh texted back: “I want you to have all my rap music.” Josh had written a large number of rap lyrics, and he and Damian shared their love for rap.

“Keep your fucking rap music. I want you instead. You’re my brother,” Damian texted, but he didn’t get a reply. At that moment, he thought Josh had killed himself.

Damian called Jocelyn. “Please keep calm, but I think Josh just committed suicide.”

Jocelyn broke into tears. “Did you text him?”

“Yes, but he didn’t respond.”

As soon as Lucy opened the double-doors, she saw Damian. Damian stared at his phone as he paced. “Damian, why aren’t you inside?” Lucy asked, livid that her son wasn’t celebrating with the extended family and friends.

“Mom, I’m glad you’re here,” he said.

“What’s the matter son? Why are you pacing like this? What happened?”

“It’s Josh. He wants to kill himself. He’s going to kill himself tonight. He might already be dead. I think he committed suicide,” Damian said as his voice got louder.

“No way. He’s the happiest kid I know. He’s always telling jokes and cracking everyone up.”

“No, Mom. Look at this.” Damian’s hands trembled as he handed her the phone. She scrolled down, stopping where Josh wrote: “I can’t do this anymore. I love you, Damian. You’re my best friend, but I’ve had a shitty life.” She’d read enough. Lucy stopped scrolling.

“We need to go to his house and stop this, Mom.” Lucy nodded her head.

“But we don’t know where he lives. We’ve only dropped him off at the entrance of the RV park. He never wanted us to go inside the park. He was too embarrassed.”

“I don’t know which home is his either. “I’ll knock on every door until I find him.”

“Isn’t his mother in the hospital. I thought you told me she was having surgery.”

“Yes, she is Mom. She’s having an appendectomy.”

“Oh, my God. We have to stop this.” Lucy ran into the hall and retrieved her purse, saying goodbye to no one.

“Oh God, please let me get there in time to save my best friend. God, please help Josh,” Damian prayed.

“Let’s go.” Lucy said. Damian already was at the minivan when Lucy unlocked the doors. Lucy started the engine.

“God, please don’t take him away He’s my brother.”

Lucy raced through the streets, getting to Josh’s RV park as quickly as she could.

They reached the Interstate 10-Loop 375 interchange, less than a mile from Josh's home. They could see the headlights and the sounds of the cars as vehicles whizzed nearby up the interchange.

Chapter 6 - Young Marines

During his pre-teen years, Josh was a pudgy, shy video-playing nerd. He didn't get out of the house much and had few friends. His shyness was severe. "We aren't putting up with the bullshit any more," Dan said, vowing to help Josh overcome his timidity.

Josh also suffered from ADHD and was in therapy. Josh refused to take medicine – he didn't want to live a medicated life. Josh had dreamed about being a Marine someday and his therapist suggested he join the East El Paso Young Marines. The Young Marines, composed of boys and girls ages 8 to 18, learn self-confidence, were exposed to a possible life in the military, character-building, leadership and overall teamwork, among the organization's many goals.

Commander Jeremy Wolfe met Josh at a recruit-parent orientation where the youngsters were introduced to a bit of "shock and awe in front of their parents," Wolfe said. "He didn't stand out as anything. He was a little chunky, to be polite, he needed a haircut. He just wasn't into his presentation and not well-groomed. He wasn't into keeping himself up. He was incredibly shy and timid."

Josh joined the Young Marines when he was 11 years old and began to develop into a young man of character and confidence. During a trip to the Gila National Forest in Silver City, N.M, some 125 miles northwest of El Paso, Wolfe took a select group of the Young Marines with him for a 24-hour camp. Wolfe only took the most physically fit Young Marines with him. He didn't want to select one young man because he didn't believe he was physically capable to the rigors of carrying a 20-pound pack into the forest five miles, starting campfires – all the duties a Young Marine has on such a trip. The young man's parents persuaded Wolfe to take him, so he did. The youngster was not physically able to stand up to the duties of the one-day camp. Josh stepped in and carried his fellow Young Marine's pack, helped him start the campfire

and “Josh just took it on. He was going to help this kid make it. He was going to push him and he became an incredible and important Young Marine on this trip,” Wolfe said.

“He helped start the campfires, he helped get all the tents built. He was the epitome of helping everyone who needed help. He was awesome.” Josh grew into his own. “He got really jazzed after that trip. He was just out there. Josh learned to swim. We had a swimming qualification. And he did (learn to swim) there.”

A lifelong bond was formed by Josh, Destiny Aguirre and Erin Wolfe, the commander’s daughter, shortly after Josh joined the Young Marines. Erin was Josh’s superior officer and “she helped teach and helped guide him,” Wolfe said. “It was a mentor and mentee” relationship despite the fact Erin was 14 when Josh was about 12. She was his sergeant and he was a private. Destiny was growing as a Young Marine as well. They bonded and became friends. “I think there was a little crush going on there as well. There was trust among the three of them,” Wolfe said. The trio formed and others began to call them “The Three Amigos.”

“He just started out as a normal recruit. I can’t say what sparked our friendship,” Erin said. The friendship among the three “was instantaneous.” The bond was formed not only during Young Marines meetings and events, but afterward. “We would hang out all the time. We’d hang out while our parents were in meetings inside. Our friendship was really important to me.”

Josh quickly took on the role of taking care of the female recruits. “He was my caregiver,” Destiny said.

“There was a lot of trust among them,” Wolfe said. Josh, while he hadn’t achieved a high rank, was a leader among the Young Marines. “Young recruits looked up to him and others could count on him. He was invested.”

On another occasion, Wolfe launched a fundraiser for the Young Marines. The prize for the Young Marines who sold the most was a chance to being the first to shave Wolfe's head. No one knew at the time, but Wolfe was planning to shave his head in solidarity with his father who was undergoing chemotherapy treatment for cancer. "I was going to do it anyway. It was just my buy-in." Josh sold so much that he had the highest total and had a chance at taking a few turns at shaving his commander's head. "He really stepped up and wanted to sell these things for the unit."

Chapter 7 - Valentine's Day 2016

Josh got up early Sunday. He had grand plans and decided to make a statement to everyone around him. He couldn't wait. It was Valentine's Day. He wasn't going to make any grand proclamation. He would let his actions speak for themselves. As usual, he wanted to win over those already close to him and make them closer.

"What are you doing, mijo?" Gaby asked.

"Mom, today's Valentine's Day."

"Do you have plans for today? What are you doing?" Josh looked at his mother incredulously.

"Of course, I have plans, Mom! How could you forget. Tonight is the Harlem Globetrotters. You couldn't have forgotten?"

Gaby smiled. She remembered what a big night this was for Josh. Lola Wilkerson, Destiny's mother, was going to pick him up early that afternoon and they were going to see the Globetrotters at the Pan American Center in Las Cruces on the New Mexico State University campus, some 45 miles northwest of downtown El Paso. Gaby could see the joy in Josh's face as he prepared for the big night. Lola had arranged for about a dozen people to go, but for Josh, none of that mattered. What mattered was that he was going to be with Destiny.

"Remember, mijo, this is not a date. You're friends." Gaby said.

"I know Mom. I know," Josh said with defiance in his voice.

Despite being only 13 years old, Josh was in love with Destiny, who was about 18 months older. They had met in the Young Marines, where she outranked him. She was a lance corporal and was his superior officer. But outside of the Young Marines, they were the best of

friends. Her rank didn't matter to Josh. She was older, had ordered him around, and he was in love. He would show Destiny and Lola his intentions were sincere and legitimate.

Josh went to his bedroom and laid out his clothes for the night. Josh was a big fan of Country-Western icon Johnny Cash and wore a black T-shirt, the kind Cash would have worn. He laid out his best blue jeans and a pair of Air Jordans. He was ready.

He had bought a red rose for Lola and a military coin for Destiny's younger brother. Destiny would get a small cardboard box with a necklace. Gaby had driven Josh to the nearby Walmart a week earlier and they chose the best-looking necklace from the jewelry display.

"I'll help you pick it out," Gaby said. Josh was two dollars short, and Gaby covered the shortage when it came time to pay. "I'm going to charge you interest," she joked. "Next week, you'll owe me \$4," she said, with a smile.

"Thanks, Mom," Josh told his life-saving mother. He returned the smile.

Lola, who had an Army career as well as her husband, would recognize the significance for her son of receiving a military coin. It was a sign of respect, friendship and would form a bond with Jacob. It would be his first military coin.

Josh knew how his mother would react. She would tell him he was going over the top and the refrain she often said: "You're only friends, Josh."

He didn't care.

Gaby was disappointed that this Valentine's Day, her only son had forgotten her this time. There was no red rose for her. But, she understood Josh's enthusiasm. Josh was growing up, becoming a man.

This would be a big night for Josh. He would make it clear in no uncertain terms his affection for Destiny. He would make a statement and Destiny would know it and so would Lola.

He didn't want to be friends. Josh wanted more. Destiny was perfect. He wondered if there was an ideal moment where he would get to hold Destiny's hand, put his arm around her and how she would react to the gifts. His heart was racing and his mind was wandering.

He knew who the Globetrotters were and would catch an occasional glimpse of the hapless Washington Generals losing as they did perennially to the Globetrotters, but he already had his seat next to Destiny. His ticket said so. He would sit next to her for the duration of the game, chatting, making her laugh and just be close to her.

The afternoon of the game, Gaby drove Josh to the supermarket. She waited for him in the car. He didn't take more than five minutes. Josh clearly knew what he was going to buy and walked out of the Albertson's supermarket with a rose. "Who are those for?" Gaby asked Josh as he got into the car.

"It's for the mother-in-law," Josh said with glee in his voice. "I can't go empty-handed."

"You know Josh, tonight isn't a date. You're just friends with Destiny. "You need to cool your jets," she reminded him.

"Oh, Mom. Enough of that. It's Valentine's Day and it's a big night for me."

"I know, mijó, but I don't want your feelings to get hurt. I know you like Destiny, but Lola has been clear that she can't date yet. Besides, she's nearly two years older than you. I know that might not seem like a lot, but when you're not even 14 and she's 15. That's a lot."

"I know. Mom, but it doesn't matter. She likes me, too. We can wait," Josh said.

"Are you sure she likes you as much as you like her? I just don't want your feelings to get hurt."

"Don't worry about me, Mom. I know what I'm doing."

Josh waited, piddling around the house, killing time. He showered early in the morning, but put on his best Valentine's Day clothes, waiting for the honk of the horn from Lola's car later in the afternoon.

The honk came. Lola drove up in the minivan about 5 p.m. "They're here. I'm going. I love you Mom," Josh said.

"Have fun, mijo," Gaby responded, cautiously.

Gaby said goodbye, but as soon as Josh closed the door, she knew Destiny, or even she, had to talk to Josh. A relationship with Destiny was not going to happen. The age gap was huge at that age. Josh was in 7th grade at Harmony Middle School and Destiny already was in high school. Besides, Lola would not let Destiny date.

Josh saw Destiny through the car windshield and his heart raced. The night was almost here. He could tell this was the first of many great nights. Josh walked down the four steps from the RV to the gravel ground, carrying gifts. He walked over the driver's side window and handed Lola the red rose.

"This is for you, Ma'am. Happy Valentine's Day," he said.

"Josh, this is very kind of you. I appreciate it and Happy Valentine's Day to you, too."

Josh walked around the front of the minivan and got in the passenger side. "And Destiny, this for you. Happy Valentine's Day," he said, with a smile and an earnestness in his voice. Josh gave Destiny the small cardboard box. She opened the box and discovered a silver chain with three ruby-colored stones.

"Wow, I wasn't expecting this at all, Josh. This is so sweet of you." She thanked him with a tight hug. Josh was in heaven. He knew the night would be a great one.

“And for the little man, we have something, too. This is for you – a military coin,” Josh told Jacob, Destiny’s little brother.

“Man, thanks.”

“Josh, you made us all very happy, but remember, this is not a date. Destiny’s too young to date,” Lola reminded him, never scolding but repeating the refrain a bit more sternly than before. Josh didn’t respond. He lowered his head just a bit. “Are you ready, let’s go. We’re meeting some other people, about five other kids and their parents.”

“Let’s go,” Josh said.

Lola pulled out of the park and headed west in Interstate 10 toward Las Cruces.

Lola drove the 45 minutes to the Outlet Shoppes near the border between El Paso and New Mexico. “Let’s get something to eat before the game,” Lola told everyone.

“Sounds like a great idea,” Destiny said.

Lola quickly found a Mexican restaurant that sold “antojitos,” or Mexican cravings such as churros. Josh looked at Mexican delicacies, but didn’t want to eat anything.

“I’m not hungry. I’m OK, thanks,” he told Lola.

“Oh, come on, Josh. You’ve got to eat. We’re not going to eat until after the game. We’ll have some nachos or something at the game, but get something to tide you over.”

Josh gave in to his inner desires, and had some churros and other snacks. “This is good,” he said.

“OK, we’ve got some time, so let’s walk around a bit. The Disney Store isn’t far from here,” Lola said. Everyone gathered their plates, napkins – threw them in the trash and left the restaurant.

“That was good, wasn’t it?” Josh asked Destiny. She loved the food and they discussed their favorites. Josh was so happy, beaming at being so close to Destiny on Valentine’s Day, spending so much time with her on this day for lovers. The store was filled with couples, many of them holding hands, smiling as they walked through the store, recalling the significance of Disney characters in their youth.

“Hey, look at this one,” a gushing young woman told her boyfriend as she pulled him by the arm to see a stuffed Disney character.

Josh and Destiny marveled at everything Disney in such a confined space. Destiny immediately made her way toward the stuffed animals.

“Look at all of these,” she said of her one obsessions. Her bedroom was filled with stuffed animals of all sorts and it was a chore every night clearing all the plush toys so she could sleep. Her eyes gravitated toward Eeyore, one of the Winnie the Pooh characters. “Don’t you just love him?” she asked Josh, as she held the stuffed animal resembling a donkey tightly.

“He’s very cute,” Josh said, smiling. “Do you like him?”

“Oh my God, I’ve never seen an Eeyore stuffed animal.”

“Let me buy it for you. I’d like to buy it for you. It’s Valentine’s Day,” Josh said with hope in his eyes. Josh had already given her a necklace for Valentine’s Day. “Oh, come on. Let me get it for you.”

“Josh, that’s very nice of you, but no. I can’t ask you to buy it for me,” she said as she released Eeyore and put the stuffed animal back where it belonged.

“I’d like to get it for you.”

Lola overheard the conversation and joined Destiny and Josh.

“Josh, thank you, but she’s got a hundred stuffed animals already. That’s very nice of you, but she’s good,” Lola said. Josh nodded his head and said he understood. He was disappointed. He wanted to shower Destiny with gifts.

Destiny and Josh walked around the Disney Store for a few more minutes, but it soon was time to go. Lola was anticipating heavy traffic to the Pan American Center and wanted to avoid the rush, if possible.

“Come on, let’s go,” she told everyone. Jacob got in the front seat, and Destiny and Josh took their seats in the second row of the minivan. “If you’re still hungry, we’ll get some nachos or something at the game.”

A long line of cars greeted her shortly after getting on Interstate 10. El Pasoans and likely people from Ciudad Juarez – El Paso’s sister city just across the Rio Grande in Mexico – wanted to see the clowns of basketball. What was normally a quick drive to Las Cruces became a bit of a slog as Lola had to slow down at times. Josh didn’t mind. As long as he had Destiny as his side, he was fine regardless of the time it took to get to the game. The chatter was infrequent. They mostly kept to themselves, watching the pecan orchards and dairy farms that dot the interstate between El Paso and Las Cruces.

Tipoff was at 7:30 p.m. and they arrived with plenty of time before the game. Lola’s friends also made it to the game and the dozen or so people would sit in two rows. The adults sat on the top row and the youngsters sat on the row below. This all worked out well for Josh. At the end of the row sitting left to right was Lola, Jacob, family friend Yandell, Josh and Destiny.

Josh was pleased. He sat next to Destiny. They exchanged a few comments and chatted a bit, but they mostly watched the game. Destiny was impressed with the comedy, but mostly with the basketball abilities the Globetrotters brought to the court.

“It’s a great show,” she commented to Josh more than once.

“They are so good. I wish I could do that,” Josh said.

Destiny chatted to others occasionally, but it was Josh who had most of Destiny’s attention, other than the Globetrotters.

“I’m so glad we’re here on Valentine’s Day. I have to thank your Mom for inviting me.”

“We’re so glad you could come with us,” Destiny said.

Josh was waiting for the right opportunity to put his arm around Destiny. This was it. He slowly lifted his arm and casually put it around Destiny, cupping her shoulder in his hand. Sure, he thought, Lola said this was not a date, but it was for him. He didn’t keep it there long, but just long enough to make it clear to everyone that Destiny was his. Destiny wasn’t comfortable with Josh’s gesture, but she didn’t remove his arm either. Josh was in love and this holiday was the best one he’d ever had.

Josh’s movements were being carefully watched by Lola and she didn’t like Josh putting his arm around her daughter. It was the first time she’d ever seen Josh make such a move and was displeased. Josh had made it clear he liked Destiny, but had never made such an overt move, and not in public. She didn’t say anything, but knew she was going to have to talk to Destiny. She knew Destiny didn’t see Josh the same way he saw her, and besides, she was not allowed to date. She made a mental note to talk to Destiny later.

The game went on and the Globetrotters beat the Washington Generals, again.

“I love these guys,” Josh told Destiny. She agreed and hoped to see them again in the future. Josh caught up with Lola as they were all walking out.

“Ma’am, thanks for this. It’s been a great night and the game was incredible.”

“Josh, we’re not done. There’s a Puerto Rican restaurant not far from here. We’re going and let’s see if we can get in. It might be packed. It’s called Si Señor. I’ve heard it’s great, but it might be too late.”

Lola made her way out of the Pan American Center parking lot, weaving her way through the mass of cars trying to exit. She had the advantage that the majority of cars were headed toward El Paso, and she was headed toward Las Cruces. After a quick 15-minute drive, she made it to Si Señor, but the manager told her and the other people in the group that the restaurant was closed for the day. They’d open the Monday for lunch.

“OK. Let’s go home,” Lola told everyone. The night was close to ending, but Josh had made his statement.

Everyone got back into their cars and went their separate ways.

The drive back to El Paso was uneventful for Josh. He and Destiny sat in the back seat of the minivan. Josh caught himself dozing off – it was shortly after 10 p.m. – but Destiny was fast asleep. It had been a long day, and the drive back to El Paso was dark, prime sleeping conditions for passengers on an hour-long trip. Josh would glance over and look at Destiny as she slumbered. Lola looked in the rear-view mirror occasionally, making sure everything in the back seat was to her liking. It was.

Lola was fully awake, driving her precious cargo, back home. Her first stop was Josh’s home. She drove into the RV park, making her way to get to Josh’s home. Josh didn’t want the night to end. He’d had one of the greatest nights of his life, as he expected it would be, and the night had come to an end.

“Josh, you’re home,” she announced.

“Ma’am, thanks for such a great night. Thank you for inviting me. It was more fun than I had expected.”

“It was our pleasure and we’re glad you had a good time. So did we. We’ll do it again,” Lola said.

“See you, Destiny,” he slid the rear passenger side door and stepped out of the minivan. Josh closed the door.

As soon as Josh was on his way up the stairs, Lola stared at Destiny.

“I saw him put his arm around you. You have to talk to him, Destiny. You’re not allowed to date. Besides, we’re moving. The house is going up for sale. Does he know we’re moving? This has no future. You have to talk to him.”

“Mom, I know. I don’t feel for him the way he feels for me. It was a surprise when he put his arm around me. I wasn’t expecting it and didn’t know what to do.”

“You need to take care of this, Destiny. Otherwise, you’re leading him on whether you intend to do so or not,” Lola said.

“I know. I know he’s got deep feeling for me, but I don’t want to lose our friendship. I’ll talk to him soon. I promise,” Destiny responded, looking down and with a sense of resignation as her voice trailed off. Lola drove out of the park and headed home. Jacob was asleep.

Gaby and Dan were waiting for Josh to come home.

“How do you think it went?” Gaby asked Dan.

“I’m sure he had a good time and the Globetrotters beat the Generals. They always beat the Generals. Those poor guys are perennial losers to the Globetrotters.”

“Josh had such high expectations, I hope it went well. I hope they liked his gifts. You know, I didn’t get a rose, but Lola did.”

“I’m sorry honey. You know he wanted to make sure that everyone got something. He even bought a medal for the little boy. Anyway, you’re my Valentine.”

Dan continued: “You know, he really likes this girl. They’ve been friends what, three-four years since they met in the Young Marines? Something like that. They’ve been close a long time.”

“I just don’t want mijo’s heart to be broken.”

“Let’s see how tonight went, first.”

“Wait, I think I hear Lola’s van,” Gaby said. Gaby and Dan looked at the door, waiting for it to open and hear from Josh. Dan stood up from the couch as the door opened. Gaby turned off the television.

“How was it, mijo?”

“Did you kiss her?” Dan asked, only half joking.

“No, but I did put my arm around her. It was the greatest night of my life.” He smiled broadly and had a spring in his step as he walked across the living room and took his seat. “It was everything I wanted it to be. I gave the mother-in-law her rose and she thanked me. I then gave Destiny her necklace and she loved it. I made her so happy. She was very surprised and grateful, Mom. Thank you for your help. I also gave Jacob his military coin. Everybody was surprised. I was a hit.”

“And how was the game?” Gaby asked.

“It was great. Those Globetrotters do magic, Mom. You know how much I like basketball, but I didn’t pay too much attention. Destiny and I talked a little during the game.”

“Mom, I did something I shouldn’t have, but I think Destiny liked it.”

“What was it, mijo?”

“I put my arm around her during the game. She didn’t say anything or take my arm away. It felt so good. I love her so much.”

“Mijo, I told you this was not a date. You know Destiny can’t date. And she’s older than you. It might seem like nothing, but she’s nearly two years older than you. You’re in middle school at Harmony and she’s a freshman in high school.”

“I know, but I don’t think that matters. We’ve known each other two years since we met in the Young Marines. It’s OK.”

“I don’t want you to get your heart broken. I think that’s where you’re going, mijo.”

“Mom, I’m OK.”

“I can tell by looking at your face how great this was. Congratulations, mijo. You’re walking on clouds, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am. It was the greatest night of my life. I’m going to bed.” Josh took off his T-shirt, freshly washed jeans and shoes. He put everything in its place, and put on his pajamas. He basked in his success. It took him a while to fall asleep as he thought about Destiny and where this Valentine’s Day would take him with the love of his life. He finally fell asleep.

He’d never slept so soundly.

Chapter 8 - Two weeks later

A few days after Valentine's Day, Lola called Gaby asking for a favor.

"We're getting ready to sell the house because we're being transferred to Olympia, Washington. You know, Lawrence is deployed in Afghanistan and I need a man to do me a big favor."

"Of course. What do you need? I can rent you Dan," Gaby said with a laugh. She reminded Lola that Dan was a construction foreman, was adept at fixing just about any household item. "And he got a large set of tools in his pickup. He can do anything you need."

"I need a ceiling fan installed in the kitchen and could you ask Dan if he'd be willing to do it."

"I'm sure he will."

"I'll make steak and shrimp for dinner, and we can make a day of it. Please come and bring Josh."

"Steak and shrimp? I'm sure he'll say yes. Josh will love to see Destiny. You know him. It sounds great."

Lola and Gaby agreed on Saturday and would meet about 2 p.m. Lola would make her finest meal and get a ceiling fan installation out of it. Lola called Destiny into her room.

"Dan and Gaby are coming over Saturday. Dan will be doing some work for us and they're bringing Josh. I think it would be a good time to talk to him."

"Mom, I really don't want to."

"I think you have to talk to him and this is the perfect time."

"I know, Mom. I'll do it then. I hope it goes well. I've never had to do anything like this."

“I know, but you have to tell him, Destiny. Besides, we’re moving. I don’t think he knows. You have to talk to Josh.”

Josh was thrilled at the news and counted the days. Josh hadn't seen or talked to Destiny since Valentine's Day.

"Why are we going? What's going on?"

"Lola needs some work done on the house since Lawrence is on deployment, so Dan is going to help her out. He's going to install a ceiling fan and anything else she needs. But here's the best part. You know what a good cook Lola is, right? She's making steak and shrimp for lunch."

"That's my favorite and I get to see Destiny. I'm living right, Mom. I wonder how she feels after our date." He wanted to sense her reaction to his gift of a necklace, putting his arm around Destiny and was eager to hear her voice.

"Mijo, I have to remind you, it wasn't a date."

Gaby looked forward to seeing her friend Lola. Josh was eager to see Destiny once more.

Saturday came. They arrived at Lola's house after a 15-minute drive. Dan immediately noticed the "For Sale" sign in the front yard. "Did you know the house was up for sale?" he asked Gaby.

"Lola had said they might be transferred, but wasn't sure. I guess they got their orders. I think that's why she needs your help. She's getting the house ready to sell."

Josh felt a jab to his stomach as he saw the sign. Destiny would be moving, too. He didn't know they were moving, but he knew it was a possibility. She was a military brat and Destiny often spoke about how frequently the family was forced to move because of the Army. The demands on the family were harsh, and just as harsh on the children. She had trouble keeping friends. This was no different, Josh thought.

Gaby pushed the doorbell. Moments later, Lola answered the door, accompanied by an invisible cloud of wonderful kitchen odors that made everyone's stomach react and mouths water. "Hey, Lola. What's that I smell? Smell's pretty good," Dan said with a smile, noticing the spread Lola had put on the kitchen table.

"Gosh, that smells good, Lola," Gaby added.

"We'll eat in a few minutes, but first, Dan has to get to work."

Dan went back to the truck to get his tools as Gaby and Josh entered the house. Destiny got up from her living room couch and greeted the guests. "Hey everyone. How are you? Thanks for coming." Josh was pleased to see Destiny after Valentine's Day. She was even more radiant as she'd been that night. She was dressed in jeans and a pull-over blouse. He looked forward to being around her, listening to her and catching up. Josh was initially at a loss for words, but they finally came to him. "Hey Destiny. How are you?" he said. He moved over the couch and began chatting with her, picking up as if they had left a conversation hanging from two weeks ago.

"Lola, lead the way. Where am I installing the ceiling fan?" Dan said, ready to get to work.

"It's over here. Follow me, please." Gaby accompanied them; she wanted to see the house.

Lola's son, Jacob, was initially in the living room, greeting everyone, but quickly went to the backyard to play.

Destiny and Josh went upstairs to the loft. It contained a second living room and they could speak without anyone interrupting. It also afforded Destiny some privacy. She had to speak to Josh.

Dan began his chore, and Lola and Gaby went to the kitchen as Lola continued making the late lunch.

“Destiny, I noticed the ‘For Sale’ sign in the front yard. I guess you’re moving,” Josh said.

“Yea, my parents are being transferred. We’re moving to Washington state. We’re going to Olympia. I’ve never been there and know nothing about other than it rains all the time. I’m not looking forward to it, but that’s the life of an Army family.”

“I’m so sorry. I’m going to miss you. I didn’t know you were moving.”

“We didn’t tell anybody at first because we weren’t sure. We were told we might move, but it wasn’t for sure. It is now. And we’re moving with my dad being deployed. That’s going to make it even tougher. My mother had to find our new house on her own.”

Josh absorbed everything Destiny was telling him, but didn’t let it affect his happiness of being with Destiny. He changed the subject and they moved on from the sadness that overcame them both. They talked about the Globetrotters, their time together in the Young Marines, their mutual friend Erin who constituted the third part of the “Three Amigos.” There was so much to discuss and not dwell on moving away. Not now, Josh thought.

They talked for more than an hour, joking, laughing and avoiding the fact that she’s moving. Josh’s heart was breaking, but on the inside. He managed to keep the veneer up and not let Destiny that he was scared of losing her.

Dan finished installing the fan, Lola finished cooking. It was time to eat.

Everyone gathered around Lola’s table. The steaks were made to everyone’s liking and the shrimp was cooked just right. Josh felt like he was part of their family, embraced in the bosom of their affection just like he did the night of the Globetrotters.

After a lengthy meal filled with more laughter, Lola and Gaby began picking up the dishes. Destiny offered to help, but Lola said: “We got this. Go hang out with Josh.”

Destiny and Josh went back upstairs to the loft. Destiny had to talk to Josh, but had been avoiding the chat she knew she had to have. Her mother had asked her to take advantage of Josh’s visit. Destiny knew she was right, but she was hoping to delay the chat for another time. There might not be another time, Destiny could hear Lola speaking to her.

“Let’s go upstairs, Josh,” Destiny told Josh. The glee in her voice was gone. She sounded serious. Josh detected the change in tone and was curious what that meant. He joined Destiny and followed her upstairs.

“Josh, take a seat,” she instructed. She sat on the couch and Josh sat on the floor. “We need to talk about something.” Josh was surprised. He had not anticipated any serious topics on this cheery El Paso afternoon. All seemed to be going well between them and the mood had been light and loving.

“Yea, what’s up.”

“We need to talk about us, Josh.”

“Sure. I thought everything was fine.”

“No, it’s not. Josh, we’re friends. You want to be more than friends and I can’t give you that.”

“That’s true. I want you to be my girlfriend.”

“That’s not going to happen, Josh. I’m older than you. You’re in middle school at Harmony and I’m in high school. That age gap is huge. Besides, we’re moving. I don’t know how soon, but we’re moving to Washington state. I might never see you again. I hope not, but I might not ever come back to El Paso. And, my Mom won’t let me date.”

“I’ll wait for you. I’ll get older. I wish I was older, I keep telling my Mom.” Tears began to well in Josh’s eyes. “I love you, Destiny. You’re perfect for me.”

“Josh, I love you, too. But not in the same way. I don’t see you as a boyfriend. I don’t feel that way. We started as friends and I want to stay friends. But I don’t feel the same way as you do.” Destiny began to tear up as well.

“Don’t do this, please Destiny.”

“I don’t want to lead you on. We have no future. I love you, but you’re my brother, my friend, my Young Marines buddy.”

They continued to talk, going in circles, but Destiny stood firm despite Josh’s pleas for an explanation. She continued to explain her reasons, but Josh didn’t want to accept the words that came from Destiny’s mouth.

Tears flowed from both of them. They hugged.

Josh wiped the tears from his eyes, but his eyes were swollen and red.

As the afternoon wore on, Josh came to accept Destiny’s words and feeling. She didn’t love him, at least not the same way. The joy of Valentine’s Day gave way to disaster just a few short days later. Josh couldn’t believe how his fortunes had changed and so quickly.

Gaby came upstairs briefly, but quickly retreated to the first floor when she saw the conversation looked serious. She didn’t listen to the conversation, but could tell by her son’s eyes, the conversation wasn’t good. She feared for her young son.

She walked back downstairs.

Not long afterward, Destiny and Josh were done talking. Josh said everything he had to say, but could not persuade Destiny. He was a friend, nothing more. She was perfect for him. He was not perfect for her.

It was time to go and everyone gathered at the front door. Dan was still smiling from his satisfied appetite and full belly, Gaby got to catch up with her old friend. And Josh got to see Destiny, the love of his life. It didn't go how he wanted, but he got to spend time with her. His eyes were red and puffy. No one dared ask why, especially Gaby. She knew Josh, in good time, would talk to her. This was not the time.

"Thank so much, Ma'am. It was one of the best meals I've ever had. If you ever need Dan to work on your house, please call him and we'll all come," Josh managed to crack a joke despite a broken heart.

"Josh, you're more than welcome. We hope to see you soon."

They walked back toward Dan's truck. Gaby got into the front passenger seat and Josh sat in the back. He said nothing, looking down the entire time. They drove home, Dan and Gaby talking about the fan installation, the incredible meal and Lola's family having to relocate. They didn't approach Josh. He kept reliving the conversation and Destiny's words – Friends.

Lola asked Destiny to sit next to her on the couch. "Did you talk to him?"

"Mom, isn't it obvious, she said as tears began to flow. We did talk. It was the hardest thing I've ever done. I told him I wasn't allowed to date and that we were moving."

"What else did you say?"

"I told him I love him, but don't love him the way he loves me. We are just friends."

"You did the right thing. He needed to know and know now."

Chapter 9 – Josh’s long walk

Dan didn’t turn off his bedroom light until after 1 a.m. Josh had been waiting. After making sure Dan was asleep, Josh – wearing only his socks so not to make any noise on the RV’s floors - snuck into Dan’s bedroom and grabbed the iPhone his mother had recently given him. Dan had placed it on his TV stand. Josh also grabbed a small headlamp from the closet and stepped back into his room. He put on his dark jeans, black hoodie and reached for his notebook and pen. He carefully opened the front door. He slowly stepped down the four aluminum steps from the RV to the ground as not to make a sound. It was after 2 a.m. and the RV park was silent. He had the steely determination of a Marine and he kept walking.

The screen on the iPhone was cracked, but he could still read the exchange of messages among his friends in the group chat. He was on the group chat and texting friends individually while he was in his mother’s hospital room hours earlier. “Please Jazmine. It’s what I want. I’m killing myself. I have a lot of rap lyrics written down. Tell Damian he should be the one to keep them. And I love him. And tell him to take care of Destiny for me,” he wrote. Shortly afterward, he wrote: “It’s not even cuz of Destiny. I love her and she didn’t do anything. I’ve had a shitty life.”

“Stop this,” his friend responded.

He walked toward the rock wall surrounding the park's perimeter and walked along the wall. He stretched the elastic band on the headlamp, put it on and turned on the light. The headlamp was working perfectly, lighting his way.

He walked about 100 yards and stopped to write a note that ultimately became five pages. He was scared and he was grieving. His eyes opened like a faucet and tears flooded the pages of his note. The pages were getting wet from Josh's tears, but he kept writing. He folded the note and put in his hoodie pocket.

He jumped the rock wall and back-tracked so he could reach the Interstate 10 on-ramp. Josh started to walk out of the RV park. He looked up to the left and saw his destination. He knew it would take a while to get where he was going. And his feet would hurt because he was only wearing his socks, but he didn't mind. His feet had suffered worse. Josh's socks quickly turned a sandy gray from the dirt and gravel he was kicking up as he walked. He felt the stones through the socks, but kept walking. He was as determined as he was when he was texting the night before.

He thought about his mother. The single mother had done so much for him since his father left the family when he was a 1-year-old, and so did his sister, Vianey. He loved Dan, the only man he ever called Dad. Josh never saw or heard from his natural father. He didn't talk about him. Dan took him from a pudgy, video-game playing social outcast to the sociable young man he was becoming. Dan was more than his adoptive step-father, he was "Dad." They loved going camping at Elephant Butte, a nearby reservoir in New Mexico about two hours north of El Paso. He remembered their times in Ruidoso, N.M., and just how outdoorsy Dan was. Josh

thought about his sister, who only a few years ago left El Paso for a life in San Diego. And he thought about Destiny – the love of his life – and Erin and Damian, his best friends.

“Tell Destiny I love her. When they find my body tell them my phone passwords 222128. I’ll leave a note. I’ll make sure you guys aren’t blamed cuz you actually made my life better,” he told Jazmine.

She asked Josh to stop with his plans. “I’ll do you one better. I’ll grab my razor and slit my wrists open up and down so I make sure I bleed to death,” Josh continued in the text.

Josh thought about those texts a great deal as continued walking. He reached Interstate 10 and looked up. He was almost there. He walked up the I-10 off-ramp and was surprised how steep it was. It didn’t seem that steep in a car. His headlamp continued lighting the way – six feet ahead of him at a time. Josh could see the roadway where there were few lights to guide him. Traffic was thin and he made sure he was walking on the far right so he wouldn’t get hit. He was tired of being sad all the time. But he hid it from his family. His mother had no idea. Dan had no clue. His friends in the chat room knew. Some of his so-called friends even asked him to record his actions, step-by-step, encouraging him.

After walking a total of about 40 minutes, Josh arrived where he wanted to be – the top of the Interstate 10-Loop 375 interchange. Josh made sure he had everything. He checked for his notebook, his iPhone and his five-page note to his mother. He tapped his back pocket and his hoodie. Josh thought of everything. He wrote a note to police, asking them to call Dan and not his mother when they find him. He left Dan’s number.

Tears welled in Josh’s eyes. He couldn’t stop sobbing. “Stop it. You’re a Marine,” he remembers being scolded by his commanders when he showed weakness or doubt. He thought about his friends.

Josh looked over the bridge. He told himself the 100-foot drop was no different from rappelling with his Young Marines as part of their training. He started to tremble as he looked over the guardrail. But he was determined. Josh faced east and saw the light colors of the sky as the sun approached the horizon. He sat on the overpass guardrail, put one leg over it. He made sure he was above the median and not over the roadway. He then put his other leg over the guardrail. He made sure no cars would be below.

He pushed off.

Josh struck the hard ground at 6:19. He landed in a small median separating the two access roads. He made sure not to strike any cars. He planned everything.

The first police officer who found Josh said he: *“was lying face up on the ground floor under the exit ramp...had expired and that no medical treatment was administered. The officer observed broken black prescription glasses, a head lamp and a black hoodie sweater on the ground next” to Josh.*

“The officer checked a spiral notebook and read that (Josh) had written a suicide note stating his apology and instructions of his request. Due to notes left behind, it was determined that (Josh) jumped off the elevated exit ramp.”

The El Paso County Medical Examiner’s Office later ruled Josh died of “multiple blunt force injuries.”

Police found Josh’s five-page note. It was still damp from his tears and had splatters of blood from the fall. Police did not release the original note to the family because of the blood stains. Gaby received a copy. Josh gave no reason for his suicide.

Traffic ground to a halt on I-10 for hours as police investigated the fall.

Chapter 10 - A knock at the door

Dan awoke about 5 that morning, hoping he and Josh would be the hospital by 7 a.m. so they could catch the doctor making his rounds, ask their questions and learn if Gaby could come home. He looked for Josh, but couldn't find him. That wasn't unusual. Because they lived in an RV park, the facility had bathrooms, showers and other services. Josh usually bathed at the park's showers.

Dan waited for him for some time. Josh didn't appear. "Where is that Butthole?" Dan thought to himself. He went to the RV bathrooms. He didn't see Josh there. He checked the showers; no Josh. Dan was getting upset. He didn't want to miss the doctor.

Dan went back to the RV and kept waiting for him to return. He noticed Josh didn't make his bed. That's unusual, Dan thought. Josh is so neat and tidy, he always makes his bed. Josh always folded his sheets on the pull-out couch where he slept and left them there well folded. Not this time. Dan thought it was odd. He thought he'd walk out and check with the park's maintenance man, Nacho. Just before he walked, out the phone rang.

"Is this Dan Smith?" the voice on the other end of the phone said.

"Yes, it is."

"Who's this?" Dan said, almost with anger considering the time.

"This the El Paso Police Department. I'm sorry to inform you, sir, but we found your son dead this morning. We don't have all the details yet, but we hope to have more information for you later today," the male voice said. "We have informed his mother at the hospital of his death."

"What are you talking about? I was with him just a few hours ago before he went to sleep," Dan yelled into the phone. He looked at the untidy bed. All pieces suddenly fit together.

Damian was right, Dan thought.

“I’m sorry, sir, but we don’t have any more details. We’ll get back to you later today. In the meantime, you might want to go to the hospital. Those officers might have more information.”

Dan awoke Gaby’s older sister, Nena, who was staying at the home because Gaby had surgery, and told her they needed to get dressed and go to the hospital. “We need to get to Gaby right away,” he implored. Nena wasn’t sure what Dan was saying because of her limited English, but knew it was critical. Something was wrong.

They quickly dressed and hustled into Dan’s pickup. He reached 100 mph, rushing to the hospital. “I need to get to Gaby,” he repeated to himself. There was little traffic to slow him down.

Gaby was already awake when two detectives knocked on her hospital door about 7:30 a.m.

“Ma’am, are you Gaby Almaraz?” one of the two police officers said.

“Yes.” Gaby responded, curious why they were visiting her and so early in the morning. They were uniformed El Paso Department police officers.

“We have unfortunate news to share with you. We found your son’s body this morning near Interstate 10. We don’t have all the details yet, but I’m sorry. Your son has died.”

“What do you mean he’s dead. I saw him just late night,” Gaby yelled at police.

Detectives and nurses tried to comfort Gaby. Gaby cried. Gaby yelled. She was inconsolable.

Dan arrived shortly afterward. As soon as Gaby saw Dan at the door, she yelled out in a way only a mother who had lost her only son could scream.

“My baby.”

He rushed to Gaby and hugged her. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know what happened. I didn’t know,” he said.

“What happened to mijo? He was just here,” she asked Dan.

Chapter 11 - Lemon Grove Nursing Home

Vianey was working at the Lemon Grove Nursing Home in San Diego. She didn't want to be a caretaker the rest of her life. She had dreams of being a detective and hoped to study criminal justice, but she was good at what she was doing and had an empathetic touch.

While working with a patient in the psych ward, Vianey struggled with a demanding man. Vianey was not allowed to have her cell phone with her while she worked, but she had it in her pocket because her mother had surgery. Vianey wanted to be close to her phone in case something happened. She knew Gaby's surgery would be more complicated than most because of her diabetes. She knew Gaby would be fine, but kept the phone nearby, just in case.

The phone kept buzzing while she worked with the troublesome patient, but she couldn't break away to check who was calling. Vianey wasn't worried, but started to grow concerned as the phone continued to vibrate. She finished bathing her patient and he finally fell asleep. Vianey asked a fellow certified nurse's assistant to help out.

"Can you cover for me for a few minutes? I need to check my phone. It's been ringing like crazy."

"No, no problem."

Vianey went to the nearest restroom and checked her phone. She noticed a number of people had called – her mother, Dan, her roommate, an aunt and others. "What could be wrong?" she asked herself, now growing worried at the volume of calls in such a short time.

She called her mother.

Gaby answered the phone. She could hear Gaby's voice breaking as she cried. Vianey could almost visualize the tears as her mother cried hysterically. Vianey somehow knew her mother was fine and this was not about her. Something had happened.

"Mom, what's wrong?"

"It's Josh, mija. Josh killed himself this morning. He jumped off the overpass near the house. I don't know anything else. The police were here this morning. I'm here with Dan and your aunts."

"What? What are you saying?"

"Josh killed himself this morning."

"Why, Mom? Why did he do this?"

"We don't know."

"What? I don't believe it. Not Josh." Despite his youth, Vianey always considered Josh the stronger of the two. He had dreams, he had ambition. On one trip to visit her, Josh asked Vianey if he could move in with her once he graduated from high school. She was so happy her brother wanted to live with her again. Now, that dream was gone.

Vianey started to sob. She had suffered with her own bouts of depression and had attempted to take her life three times before. "Come home. I need you here," her mother said.

"Mom, I'll get there as fast as I can." Vianey dropped to her knees and cried into her hands. "Oh my God, not Josh."

Vianey froze and couldn't get up. She began to cry hysterically. The bathroom was secure. It was safe. Outside the bathroom, life was real. Outside, Josh was dead. This could not be happening, she thought. She sat on the bathroom floor, sobbing, crying at the loss of her brother. She was so proud of him. He had grown into such a mature young man, and couldn't

believe he had killed himself. She continued to sit on the bathroom floor and held herself tight.

“This isn’t real.”

Vianey sat on the bathroom floor for a long time, it seemed like hours. “I’ve got to get out of this restroom, but I can’t let people see me like this,” she thought to herself. She texted a friend she worked with and asked her to come get her. “My brother just passed and I need to get home.” The friend arrived shortly afterward and brought one of the nurses with her. Vianey had never met the nurse before. Vianey was speechless. She couldn’t talk.

Vianey couldn’t drive and the nurse drove Vianey to her apartment.

“You need to start looking at flights. You need to fly back to El Paso right away, but it will be very expensive because of the short notice. Here, I have a \$200 in my purse. They’re just sitting in my bag. I don’t need the money. It was meant for something good and this is something it was meant for. Take it.”

Vianey became even more emotional at the kindness coming from a nurse she’d never met. “You need to relax and take a bath, and then start doing that,” the nurse said.

“Thank you,” Vianey managed to say through her tears.

Vianey’s roommate was home when she arrived. They hugged as soon as they saw each other. The roommate had lost her own sister and knew Josh. They cried together. The roommate gave Vianey \$100 for the airfare and a cousin who arrived later also gave her \$100 for the plane. Vianey called the airline, but there were no flights left that day. She booked the first flight she could the next morning from San Diego to El Paso.

Vianey didn’t know what to do. She couldn’t fly out that night so she had to wait until the next day. She was paralyzed and felt trapped. Vianey liked being by herself, but not this time. She didn’t want to be alone with her thoughts.

Vianey's roommate was housesitting and asked her if she wanted to come with her. It would take her mind off Josh's death, she said. Vianey went, and quickly fell asleep from the exhaustion. She cried herself to sleep.

Vianey went back home later that night and work up early to catch her flight back to El Paso. Andres Martinez, one of her best friends, met her at the El Paso airport. As soon as they saw each other, they embraced and cried. Andres knew Josh and drove Vianey to the hospital. The drive was quiet. No one talked. Andres had a million questions, but he dared not ask any one of them.

Andres and Vianey walked toward the hospital. Vianey dreaded what she would find. She thought about her life in San Diego, her life away from El Paso, and all that she had missed by being away. They took the elevator and walked towards Gaby's room. She stopped briefly at the door. Dan and her two aunts – Nena and Blanca – were with Gaby. As soon as she entered the room, Gaby stretched out her arms and began to cry. So did Vianey.

"I'm so sorry Mom. I can't believe this happened. Poor Josh," Vianey said through her tears as she hugged her mother. Gaby didn't say anything. Her tears spoke for her. Everything was now real for Vianey. The security of the bathroom floor was gone. Reality hit her. She had refused to believe Josh was dead, but when she saw her mother in her emotional, fragile state, she knew nothing would ever be the same again.

After a few minutes, Gaby released her hug on her surviving child, but still sobbed. "Why Mom? What happened?"

"I don't know what happened. We don't know. The police said they'd have more information later."

Andres hugged Gaby and cried as well. He also knew Josh and grieved for him and the family.

“It’s not supposed to be this way.” Josh was supposed to bury her in the distant future. She was not supposed to bury her younger sibling. Vianey never expected to have to plan Josh’s funeral, but that’s what she ultimately had to do. Gaby was still recovering from her surgery and was mostly bedridden.

She had recently seen Josh and he seemed so happy. Both siblings had suffered during their childhood. The siblings were similar in so many ways, having dealt with Vianey’s three suicide attempts and her depression. Vianey was the quiet one. Josh never opened up about his personal pain, but he was more open than her. They were best friends. “Why didn’t he reach out to me?” Vianey questioned.

Chapter 12 – You’re a liar

Damian slept soundly, knowing he’d done everything to stop his best friend from killing himself. He was sure Dan would make sure Josh did nothing stupid.

Damian was awakened to his cell phone ringing about 9 a.m. He picked up his phone and saw it was Jocelyn. “Jocelyn, what’s up?” Damian asked.

“You’re a liar. You’re a liar,” she screamed into the phone.

“What did I lie about?”

“You told me he was alive. You’re a liar. He’s dead.”

“I looked him in the face, Jocelyn. He was alive when we left his house this morning.”

“Well, now he’s not.” Jocelyn hung up.

Damian checked his Instagram account. Someone had posted a report from a local television station that a young man had jumped from the freeway and killed himself. “Oh my God. It has to be Josh,” Damian said to himself.

“Mom. Mom,” Damian ran, looking for his mother. “Mom, look at this. Josh did it. He’s dead, Mom.” Damian began to cry. “He did it.”

Lucy looked at the Instagram page and saw the news report.

“We need to get to the RV park.” Damian quickly dressed and Lucy drove to the RV park. Damian pounded on Josh’s door. No one answered. A neighbor heard the knocking and came out.

“You’re too late. Dan has gone to the hospital.”

“Were you the young man who was here early this morning?” the neighbor asked.

“Yes, I was.”

“You were right. He’s not here any more. Josh is gone.”

Lucy drove Damian to the hospital to be with Gaby. Damian's best friend was dead and he knew he needed to be with Gaby. Damian didn't cry. He knew he needed to remain composed. While at a stop light, Lucy turned to Damian: "This is life. This is really hard and you shouldn't have to go through this." Damian listened to his mother but at this moment, all he wanted was silence. He was in shock.

After a short drive, they arrived at the hospital. Damian knew it would not be easy to face Gaby, but he needed to do it for Josh. While walking toward Gaby's room, Brian Smith, Dan's younger brother, greeted Damian in the hallway. Brian extended his hand.

"Thanks for what you did. Thanks for going to the RV park this morning and trying to put a stop to this," Brian said. Damian shook his hand, but didn't stop to chat. He wanted to see Gaby, despite how hard it was going to be to see her.

Damian entered the room and saw her. He could tell Gaby had been crying for hours. Her grief gave him chills. Her cries haunted him and he could not imagine being a parent and losing a son, much less to suicide and the realization she'd never see him alive again. She was wailing in her grief as her two sisters and Dan tried to console her. Gaby paused for just a moment when she saw Damian. She saw him, her son's best friend, who was about the same height as Josh, wore a jacket like the kind he wore and had a similar haircut.

"Damian, mijo is gone," Gaby yelled.

Damian went to her bedside and hugged her tightly.

"I loved him like a brother."

"I know."

Chapter 13 - A secret revealed

James needed to talk to Gaby. He called her and said he wanted to talk to her alone.

James had moved away from the RV park a year earlier when he married Olivia. James had a lot on his mind and needed an additional shot of courage to speak to Gaby. He started drinking early in the day - tequila, vodka – anything he could get his hands on other than beer. He'd been drinking since he learned Josh had died two days earlier. He needed to express his condolences for the loss of the young man he considered his nephew – his brother – his best friend. James previously lived about 300 feet from Gaby and Dan, less than a football field in length away.

James had been close to Josh. They met one night when James was walking his dog around the park. Josh, always looking to make a friend, started talking to James. The two became fast friends. Josh quickly learned that James had been an Army staff sergeant and served overseas.

Gaby was still hurting from the appendectomy, but was able to wear jeans and a blouse when James arrived. She could tell he'd been drinking.

Gaby sat on the couch after letting James inside, and shortly afterward, James fell to his knees and reached for her hand. "I want you to forgive me because I couldn't help you." Gaby looked at James with a puzzled look, curious why he was on his knees asking for forgiveness. She didn't understand what James meant.

"I know he always loved you, but I don't understand," Gaby said.

"There was a secret between me and him. I need to tell you this," James said. One night, Josh used the key James had given him to pick up Gabriel and found James inside. "I had a fucking gun in my mouth. I wanted to kill myself. I was in a dark hole and I couldn't get out."

Josh had decided that while he was in the Marines, that he would study psychology and help military members with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. James had returned to the United States with PTSD and had been injured during one of his tours.

“I wanted to hurt myself and he saved my life, Gaby,” James said.

“Everything I have now – my wife Olivia, my sanity– is because of Josh. You know, she’s pregnant. I owe it all to Josh. I could have died.”

“We talked all night. He saved me,” James said through his tears. Gaby also cried, never knowing that her son had saved James. James talked about how Josh, who was 12 years old at the time had bonded with a 29-year-old Army veteran and saved his life. James took comfort that Josh was willing to listen to him.

“He was so willing to listen to everything I had to say. I saw him as my best friend. Josh was a different kind of person. It was so easy to talk to him.”

Gaby had no idea James wanted to take his life and that Josh saved him. Josh often asked James about Army, despite wanting to become a Marine. “He wanted to know not about the killing or the bombing, but about how to survive. He wanted to know about dealing with other soldiers, how to be a leader.”

“There wasn’t a bad bone in that kid’s body. I’m honored that he kept our secret.”

Chapter 14 - Standing guard

Josh's services were held a week later at San Jose Funeral Home. Hundreds of people attended – his friends from the Young Marines, friends from Harmony School of Innovation where Josh attended, his many friends from the RV park and many others. Among the friends were some of the people during the Instagram chat where Josh said had he'd kill himself and didn't bother to check on him - except for Damian who did go check on him.

"It was like a show. They showed up, but they didn't seem to want to be there," Erin said. "It really bothered me. They didn't seem to be the most genuine people. Maybe they thought he was joking. If they cared so much, they would have been as impacted as Damian was."

Damian attended the services and was just as angry as Erin.

"He told a lot of people in the chat what he was going to do. No one reacted. It pissed me off. They knew. They claimed to have cared about him. Bullshit. They cared about their own interests. They knew what he said, yet they didn't do shit. These people he made laugh so they would feel good. They were telling jokes" at the funeral.

He went up to Josh's casket to say his goodbyes. "He was in his uniform. I put one medallion on his chest and one in his hand. We were together no matter how far apart we were.

"I thought he'd open his eyes. It's a really tragic experience when you see your best friend – your brother – to be cold to the touch. He knew I loved him and that I cared about him. He heard me tell him to his face. I know for a fact that if the roles were reversed, I would have stayed (and not committed suicide). I was able to compose myself. Dan asked me if I wanted to speak at the podium. I spoke and then sat down. Josh was my other half."

Gaby and Dan asked Jeremy Wolfe, the Young Marines commander, if he could stand guard over Josh's casket during the funeral. Wolfe said he would be happy to do so. He had

made sure the funeral home had dressed Josh in his Young Marines uniform and it looked perfect.

“Yea, it was an honor to post during a funeral. I did it before in funerals for Marines,” Jeremy said.

Standing guard for someone so young as Josh “is a tough one. It’s never an honor to lay someone down. He was the epitome of a good heart and a good kid. Those who he allowed to get close to him, he impressed immensely.”

Gaby appreciated Jeremy putting on his uniform and standing guard for her son. “Seeing that man standing there, it was one of the most beautiful memories I have. It was such an honor.”

As soon as Erin arrived, she saw throngs of people and cars everywhere. “He impacted so many people. You could see how impactful his life was by the number of cars. There were people inside, outside, in the foyer. You’d think someone famous had passed away. The manner of his death made it more tragic and impactful.”

Gaby was just as surprised by the number of people who attended Josh’s funeral. Members of five motorcycle gangs attended.

“And they never get together. Several Young Marines groups attended, and they also never get together. So many people I don’t know were there.”

Josh was eulogized by several people.

“Everybody talked about him with so much love. Everybody talked about his smile, and how his smile would change your bad day,” Gaby said.

Destiny had moved to Olympia, Washington, and was not able to attend.

“I absolutely hated it. I couldn’t go back. It was very hard. I wanted to be at the funeral. I’d like to visit Josh’s grave. It’s going to hurt when I see it. But I want to be there. Feel badly about the conversation. I just wish that hadn’t been our last conversation.

Chapter 15 – Leaving San Diego

Doctors kept Gaby at the hospital because Josh's death had such an impact on her recovery. She recovered from the surgery slowly but completely. But her emotional state was fragile. Her blood pressure fluctuated and as a precaution, she stayed at hospital. Gaby went back to the RV she shared with Dan a few days after Josh died.

Vianey and Gaby had much to discuss. Vianey wanted to leave San Diego and return to El Paso, be with her mother.

"Mom, I know you have Dan, but I feel like that's not enough. I've worked hard, but what matters to me more is that you be OK. We're family and you're not OK. You're never being to be OK, but I want to be near you. I can't be near you if I'm in San Diego."

"Mija, you have a life in San Diego. You can't throw away all that you've worked for. I'll be fine. Like you said, I have Dan," Gaby pleaded.

"Mom, I can't be miles away from you."

Vianey had made up her mind and even before the conversation with Gaby, she had called the Lemon Grove Nursing Home and notified them she was going to work another three weeks and tender her resignation. The call was bittersweet. Vianey loved her life in San Diego, but family was more important. Her mother had sacrificed so much for her children. Vianey flew back to San Diego to wrap things up. Her recently purchased Hyundai Elantra was waiting for her and she was going to ultimately drive back.

She went back to Lemon Grove, but her heart no longer was in San Diego. She went through the motions and did her job, but the joy was gone.

Going back was hard for Vianey. All she thought about was Josh.

She packed the Elantra for what she knew would be the longest drive of her life. Vianey had made the round-trip drive between El Paso and San Diego at least eight times, but she knew the usual 11-hour trip this time would seem like the longest one. This would be a dreadful drive, she thought. She didn't want to arrive in El Paso. She'd manage to control her thoughts, but at some point, she knew she might not. She feared doing something stupid that she would come to regret and deepen her mother's pain. At the same time, "I want to see him again," she uttered to herself.

Somewhere between San Diego and Tucson, Arizona, she thought "Maybe if I speed and crash, everything will go away." She was in a great deal of pain, alternating between tears and controlling her emotions. "I have to be strong." She left San Diego in the afternoon and was dark by the time she reached Tucson after a six-hour drive. She had planned to stay with Dan's grandmother, Claudette Glover, in Pinetop, Arizona, for the weekend and decompress. Vianey and Claudette were close and she called her Grandma.

After two days in Pinetop, Vianey hit the road again and arrived in El Paso. She remained reluctant to return to El Paso. She loved her mother, but didn't want to see her. It reminded her of Josh's death. "I don't want to see anything that reminds of what happened," she said to herself. She was uncertain of her future as well. She had no job waiting for her, she didn't know what her life would be like in her El Paso. She didn't want to go back to her old habits and spend each weekend drinking with old high school buddies. And she thought about her mother. She wanted to be strong for her, but wasn't sure she could be the shoulder her mother needed. The drive allowed her to think about Josh, her mother, and her future. She didn't want to go back to the RV. It was 40 feet long, but didn't provide the privacy Vianey craved. But she had no immediate option. She had to go back to the RV and live with Gaby and Dan.

Josh's personal belongings would still be at the RV. He slept in the living room and she feared what being so close to his personal items would do to her.

"I could still smell him," she said after she returned. She didn't want to be reminded every day of the brother she lost. Additionally, the front door of the RV provided a close look at where Josh jumped. The freeway was less than a mile west from the RV.

"I don't want to look at that every day," she thought to herself. Vianey didn't understand how Gaby could remain in the RV when it was so close to Josh's final moments.

Chapter 16 - Memorial Pines Cemetery

Gaby goes to the Memorial Pines Cemetery in Sunland Park, N.M., every Sunday, weather permitting. She's frequently accompanied by Vianey. The drive from Gaby's Northeast El Paso home to the cemetery is about 45 minutes, but it's a drive she takes with joy every time she makes it. She gets to visit her Josh.

Every year, Gaby gives Josh a new pair of Nike Air Jordan sneakers, size 11. Josh's granite headstone is horizontal, not vertical like most of the gravestones in the cemetery. On this Sunday in February, her new boyfriend, Daniel Lucero, removes the silicone that seals the old sneakers under glass, cleans up any remaining shards, and Gaby places the new sneakers in an opening made specifically for Josh's shoes. Gaby gently lays the new pair inside the gravestone and Daniel places a new bead of clear silicone, gently lays the new glass to cover the sneakers and quietly taps the edges of the glass to assure a good seal. Gaby's former boss, Darrin Hart and Vianey look on. Daniel cut a finger with a shard of glass, but he didn't let that stop him. He licked the small amount of blood from the wound and kept cleaning the shards of glass. He left no pieces of glass inside the hole for Josh's sneakers. It would be as clean as possible.

Gaby ordered the headstone from a company in the bordering Mexican state of Chihuahua. She was proud of her purchase and the workmanship. To the right of Josh's sneakers is a photo of him in his Young Marines uniform. The photo has started to fade and Gaby said she's going to have to replace it soon. She wore a brown leather jacket with the U.S. Marines logo and Josh's last name on the right-hand side of the jacket. The gravestone is surrounded by artificial sunflowers, Josh's favorite flower.

Josh worked hard and did odd jobs for friends to make enough money to buy himself the latest model of Air Jordans. He was a fanatic about how he dressed – shirts always ironed so the

they were crisp, his shortly cropped hair was just right and his jeans also ironed with a crease down the center of each leg. And his Air Jordan sneakers topped off his attire.

“Josh would love it here,” Gaby said. “He’s next to the sand and dirt bikes ride behind the cemetery all the time.” Josh’s grave is just three graves from the cemetery’s edge. “I bought that plot. When the time comes, they’ll bury me in that spot, next to Josh. One of Josh’s friends bought the grave on the other side.”

After Gaby placed the Air Jordan’s in the compartment and Daniel laid down the glass, everyone stood at the what would be the foot of the grave and stood silently. They were alone in their thoughts about the son, brother and friend they left behind.

Gaby thanked everyone for coming and after about an hour of working on the sneakers installation, sharing some memories and telling old stories about how “travieso,” or mischievous in English, Josh could be, everyone headed to the three motorcycles parked nearby. They left and drove to Hatch, N.M., a farming community about 45 minutes north on Interstate 25 for some of the community’s famous hamburgers at Sparkys and a drive on a sunny, nearly perfect day.

Chapter 17 - The flag

Gaby proudly flies the American flag at the front door of her two-story home on El Paso's Northeast Side. She flies the stars and stripes not only to recognize she's a naturalized citizen, but in honor of her late son. "That's Josh's flag," the youthful-looking 45-year-old says. Gaby's has light-rimmed glasses, light shoulder-length hair and sits with one leg underneath the other wearing a jumper that makes her look even younger with a variety of tattoos on her thighs, arms and chest. "I'll always fly it."

"I used to tell him he was Mexican because I was born in Chihuahua," Gaby said. "But he would correct me and say he was an American and he wanted to serve his country – ever since he was about five years old. He was always helping the others in the Young Marines. If anyone needed help with how to shine their boots, how to do their brass, he was there. If someone was having trouble with the physical tests, Josh was there to help.

"His boots were like no one else's. You could see your reflection in them they were shined so nice."

Vita

Eraldo Enrico Giorgio Chiecchi, known as Dino by his friends and colleagues, is a journalism professor at the University of Texas at El Paso. Chiecchi graduated with a bachelors of arts in journalism in 1985 from UTEP. He started his journalism career at the El Paso Herald-Post in his hometown. He then went to work at the Austin American-Statesman, the San Antonio Express-News, South China Morning Post in Hong Kong, Tucson Citizen, the Associated Press and the El Paso Times. He worked in various reporting and editing positions before teaching newswriting and photography at UTEP. He is the editor of a book called “100 Questions and Answers about the U.S.-Mexico Frontera” which is published in English and Spanish.

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